



**In the Flesh**

Jennifer Cloud

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## **Prologue**

At five years old, Itana Harkin thought her mother was trying to kill her when she slipped the straight razor across her wrist and slid the one-inch piece of silver beneath her skin. Instead, it was an act of love. Itana always knew it was there and the reason she had to endure the burning pain pure silver caused. The scar never went away and the tendons running beneath the square patch ached.

She never dared remove it though. The silver made her normal. At least she hoped so. Every birthday she knew that little piece of silver was all that kept him away, and kept the world safe from what she could unleash. From what she really was.

## Chapter One

Itana slid out of the covers, leaving Quinton alone in the king sized bed. He was lovely, with muscles and such that normal women sought in their mates. Watching his naked form in the twisted pile of blue sheets tempted her to slide back into bed and toy with him a bit longer. It would be cruel though.

She never let a man touch her twice for fear some bond would develop. The act of coupling could be very powerful, producing emotions she couldn't entertain. She wasn't permitted anything beyond quick pleasure. It was too risky. Her scent was released into the air during orgasm, and that could attract the monster.

Even in her mind she was afraid to refer to the monster by his real name. Surely saying it aloud wouldn't summon the beast like some mystical spell that had been broken. As she slid on her pants, she dared to think it, Veris. Her husband, Veris.

Sure she'd never taken the vow. That much was spared her, but when an immortal chooses a bride, there's not too many ways to talk him out of it. Itana had only met Veris once. She'd been a child. It was before her mother had gone to extremes to protect her half-breed daughter.

From what Itana could remember, Veris had heard rumors of Itana and sought her out. Few other details remained, except that he'd been very tall and it chilled her skin when he touched her blond hair, pulling a strand in front of her face and saying something perverse enough for her mother to risk casting him out. Itana dreamed of him though, and often woke up screaming.

Itana found her bra beneath the bed and put it on, hooking the back closure. She adjusted the black lace then found her sweater. Her shoes were the last. With those on she hurried, fearing her lover would wake and make her hasty exit awkward.

Giving one last glance toward Quinton, she sighed at his lovely bare ass, his muscled arms reaching across the bed. It must be nice to wake up with someone after sharing a night of passion.

With practiced stealth, she left the bedroom and found her way to the oak wood front door. The sun hadn't risen yet, but threatened to break apart the darkness any minute with its cutting rays. She'd never liked sunrise. It always felt violent, tearing at the gentle night until it was obliterated.

Her car was parked in the driveway. Quinton had found it odd that she wanted to follow him instead of riding with him after their meeting at the club. He'd understand this morning.

She couldn't go back to The Underground tonight. Quinton would no doubt be there, searching through the dancing masses to find her. She'd taken enough photographs to tide her over, so tonight she'd go to The Gaslight. No one messed with her there.

Itana got into her Subaru and took off through the dusky streets while Disturbed played at an obscene volume for the early hour. The little almost-truck handled well as she raced through the streets. She didn't slow until she reached the river.

The turn for her road was hidden, nothing more than a dirt and gravel section running next to the railroad tracks. She followed it down, leaving the steel bands with its abandoned railroad cars parked along the way. The road curved back toward the river and

the precious bit of woods hidden at the edge of downtown.

Her home was in one of the apartment buildings hidden in this little oasis. There were two buildings and a warehouse back there. The warehouse was deserted, except by a rock band that used it to practice badly every Saturday night.

The river cut off the woods from town, keeping most tree huggers from getting too close. Railroad tracks created an obstacle on the north and southern ends of the road. Finally, the warehouses, all but one unoccupied, created a barrier of fences and barbed wire that few wanted to cross.

Finding this place was a miracle, but two other renters had also found these apartments. One was a little old lady who never had company. The other was a man, tall, dark and luscious. Needless to say, she couldn't go anywhere near him. Not even the loneliest of nights would let her entertain his advances. She couldn't very well sneak out just to go across the parking lot.

Itana pulled in front of her building and parked. There were at least eight apartments back there, but the bottom ones were in too dilapidated to rent. The others also stayed empty, probably because of their location.

She'd just cut off the ignition when a familiar motorcycle pulled up. Clad in black leather from his toes to the edge of his black helmet was Gershon, her luscious neighbor. Straddling the back, and holding on for dear life, was a pretty little blond. He always brought home Barbie "wanna-bes." Their busts were usually twice the size of their heads, they had the intelligence of a twelve-year-old, and enough make-up on to keep a drag queen happy.

Gershon pulled the helmet off, freeing his long black hair. It tumbled down, making her wonder what it would be like to run her fingers through it, and what those dark strands would be like sweeping across her breasts. No doubt it was like spun silk.

Her fantasy quickly ended when he caught her gaze and smiled. She'd known Gershon for around a year and had never let anything romantic develop. Well, that wasn't exactly true. They'd flirted, but that was all she could allow. He'd made a few advances, but never pushed the line of friendship. Maybe he sensed her inability to commit to anything more than a roll in the sack.

The Barbie on his bike was wind blown and looked drunk. The conquest wouldn't last long, and that wasn't a testament to his lovemaking. She'd heard his women crying out in pleasure, then he'd have them back on the road before they had a chance to ask him his name a second time.

"Hi, Gershon."

Itana nodded and tried to keep the smile off her lips. It was a struggle. Miss Blond and Built was already adjusting her clothes, demonstrating her ample cleavage. Poor thing didn't know that Gershon wasn't into second dates any more than she was.

"Hello, Itana." He said her name as if it were a beautiful lyric. She could understand why women went home with him. Even words coming off those cherry lips made her knees tremble.

"Have fun, Gershon." She cast a glance back at the blond, set her car alarm, and started inside. It was time for her to get some sleep.

"Isn't that what we've both been doing? Getting the wild out of our systems?"

The statement was odd and made her stop the quick retreat to her apartment. Digging her heels into the dirt and broken concrete, she turned. He was looking at her. That

wasn't exactly accurate. He stared *into* her. Those bedroom baby blues made her breath catch in her throat.

"Pardon?"

He smiled that wicked grin then pulled his latest conquest into a melting embrace. Gershon kissed her passionate and Itana was forced to watch them. Worse, the whole time Gershon watched her.

She fought the impulse to lick her lips, to wonder what that tongue would feel like invading her mouth. Gershon's gaze held her until his kiss with blond and built broke. It must've been wonderful because the blond leaned against the bike, seemingly unable to stand on her own.

"Are you going out tonight?" Gershon ignored the new woman, keeping his attention on Itana.

"Yes." She was hot and hoped her cheeks hadn't flushed.

"Taking more of those photos for galleries to sell for you?"

"No. I think I'll just drink a few and find a reason to stay out of the house."

He looked up her body, his eyes traveling too slowly for curiosity. "Then I'll find you."

Again his statements took her off guard. "Wouldn't it be easier to find me at home?"

"No." He stepped forward, leaving the blond glaring at Itana from across the bike. His steps drew closer until less than two feet separated them. "At home, you have your defenses up. When you're drinking, it's another matter. You might give into those naughty thoughts of yours." One pale and perfect hand came up, touching her cheek softly and making her wish for more intimate contact.

*He couldn't know what I was thinking, could he?*

"I just left one man's bed. I think my defenses will be intact for a few months now. I guess you missed out." Her words were strong, prideful, although her knees were turning to jelly.

"A good man could break you of that habit."

"A good woman might kill you."

Gershon laughed, then ventured a look over his shoulder at a very angry lady. Apparently alcohol hadn't inhibited her jealousy, only her willingness to say no to handsome men.

Even with the blond at a boiling point, he leaned closer to Itana, placing one hand on her shoulder so she couldn't escape. "I will get you tonight. You've teased me for too long."

A thousand comebacks popped into her mind, but none made it to her lips. She had no idea why tonight was special, or why Gershon was coming on so strong in front of his girlfriend. Either way, the best she could manage was a nod before pulling away and starting for her apartment building.

She didn't venture a look back, until she reached the front door. When she turned around, he was staring with hunger so pure, it shocked even her.

*He's just drunk. Ignore it.* The thought of a night with him would be divine. It would also mean that she'd have to move and never see him again. She liked him too much for that. Let him screw a hundred women, as long as Gershon continued their Tuesday night video rentals and Wednesday wine under the stars.

Itana pulled open the heavy metal door to her apartment building. The place was

nothing but broken concrete and bricks on the first floor. It seemed sturdy enough, but she was pretty certain a building inspector would condemn the place if he ever found it.

Sharp metal stairs went up. At one time they were wood but a bad flood rotted the lower section so the landlord replaced them with odd clanging metal ones. Itana didn't mind. She was the only occupant in this building. The other two occupied apartments were in the building across the parking lot. Gershon rented one and an old lady had the other. She'd never been inside their building, but suspected it was in a similar condition.

It was strange that Gershon always came to her place. She hadn't thought about it until now. Movies were at her apartment, wine on the roof here. So far, she hadn't even crossed the lot to visit him.

Itana reached her door. The lock was cantankerous, rusted with bits of paint flaking off every time she slid the key into place. If she didn't lift the handle just right while turning the key, the door wouldn't open. That lesson brought on the first time she'd met Gershon. She'd stomped back downstairs convinced that she'd been given the wrong key. Gershon led her back up and showed her how the door worked. It seemed his had a similar problem.

She sighed, then grew ashamed for acting like a lovesick schoolgirl. Living in a dream world was unproductive. She couldn't have Gershon, even if she'd thought about him last night while with Quinton. He had to remain a fantasy.

Finally the door squeaked open and warm air flooded out. Itana tossed her purse onto the floor, then pulled off her spike-heeled boots, sliding them beneath the coffee table. She flopped down on the leather couch. It was good to be home.

For all the nastiness on the outside, the inside was pretty nice. It didn't hold heat well and bare bricks lined every wall. The windows were dingy with something like chicken wire imbedded in the glass. The top section of the window swung out, letting in fresh air, and an occasional bird if she left them open too long. There were no screens, but even insects hadn't been able to find this place.

Despite the cosmetics, the landlord had provided new appliances and a large garden tub. The apartment was a one bedroom, but the rooms were very large. More than likely this place had been another warehouse before the Herta Corporation converted the place into apartments. It was hard to tell. The hard wood covered up whatever the original flooring had been. They felt solid, so she suspected they were concrete.

Quinton's scent held on her like sin. She got off the buttery couch and went into the bathroom, shrugging off clothes as she walked. The night had been too long and she was exhausted.

Steam rose as the shower beat against the clear glass walls of the stall. The garden tub was across from it, looking inviting but she didn't want to stew in water after Quinton's touch. It was better to wash it all down the drain.

Her bra fell to the floor and she stepped inside. Reward was immediate, clean, and revitalizing with soap eradicating her sin and sending it to the sewers. After her fatigue-induced stupor, the water made her able to think again. The first thing in her mind wasn't the sexy Quinton left alone in his bed, but Gershon.

"Arrogant asshole," she muttered before running soap over her face.

There was no exaggeration. Gershon had been arrogant from the first day she'd met him. He reeked of sex and the dirty thoughts that traveled through her mind when she was alone and longing to be touched.

He wouldn't find her tonight. It was another one of his odd games. He'd never come on so strong though. Something was happening with him. After knowing him a year, why would he act like that now? Nothing special had happened between them, and tonight was of no great importance.

Itana turned off the water and wrapped a towel around her body. A few hours sleep would make her feel whole again.

She padded down the hallway and went into her bedroom. It was decorated with minimum clutter. There was one print near the window and hanging on the wall next to the bed was a large calendar with a photo of the moon breaking through the clouds. She glanced at it, loving that one picture more than the others in the calendar. It was on the wrong month though. She wasn't fond of the next picture, one of those desert scenes. Still it was weird to stay a month behind. She flipped the page, glanced at the date and froze. In her alcohol daze of killing minutes, hours, and days, she'd overlooked her own birthday. She was another year older today.

"Shit!"

Her towel was dropped to the floor and she climbed into her queen-sized bed without regard for her wet hair, or the damp pillow it would leave. The sheets were a little too cool at first, making her shiver until her body heat warmed them.

"If there's any justice in this world, let me sleep straight through until tomorrow."

Birthdays were the hardest. Things happened on the anniversary of her birth, and they usually weren't good. Darkness loomed over her from the moment she'd taken her first breath. Even lying in bed, she felt the silver in her wrist burning, wanting to be released from its flesh prison.

On the brighter side, she was closer to freedom. If Veris didn't find her by her thirtieth birthday, then she would be released from any commitments to him. Not that she'd made any. It seemed in some worlds, a woman didn't have a say so.



## Chapter Two

Itana rolled over and looked at the clock. It was four, the sun too high in the sky to be tolerable. She'd slept as long as she could, not as long as she wanted. With an intolerably dry mouth, she stumbled from bed and went to the kitchen.

She took a glass from the cabinet and drank several glasses of water before quenching her thirst. The only plant she had left looked a little dry, so she shared, pouring the last of a glass into the dirt. It would die eventually. Plants never lived long in her home.

From the window she could see Gershon's motorcycle. It was parked directly behind her truck, either in a poor attempt to block her in, or a reminder from his earlier threat. He was acting peculiar.

*Maybe I'll stay home tonight.*

She hated being at home alone. Nights were the worst. She feared every noise, wondering if Veris had finally found her. It hadn't been so bad when her mom had been alive. Mom kept her company, telling her stories or watching television together. Damn, she missed her.

The last five years had been hard as hell. She'd found a great profession in avoiding her fears. It turned out this bastard child had a great eye for pictures and wasn't too bad at sketches. Her photographs sold better, having been chosen to line the walls at many prestigious galleries in the artsy side of town. A few sketches had sold, but most regarded them as too dark for the average home.

Another glance at the window convinced her that staying home wouldn't work either. Gershon might still come over. From her kitchen, she could see the lights on in his apartment, and a dark form at the window. It looked like Gershon was staring out his window at her.

All this time living across from Gershon, and she'd never been afraid to face him until now. One mistake and she'd lose one of the few friends she had. His behavior probably had something to do with her birthday. Some chemical pheromone she gave off that begged the fates to make life more difficult. All kidding aside, whatever her other half was might be having some sort of effect on him. Each year the feeling of something longing to emerge, to take over, grew stronger.

*Great, so I just have to avoid him until tomorrow.*

It sounded easy enough. She'd get dolled up, go to her car, and drive away. After an hour or so, she'd get some dinner then come back home. Gershon could spend all night searching the clubs for her. She'd park at the side of the building and keep the lights off. By the time he suspected anything amiss, it would be tomorrow.

Gershon didn't usually leave the house until nine o'clock. Unfortunately, she was hungry now. She'd never been particularly good at shopping. Never had this been more evident as when she opened the cabinet and found nothing but stale cereal. So far this evening was off to a fantastic start. There was nothing to do but get ready to go out.

Itana sulked into her bedroom. It was too early to face the day and she didn't feel like putting on make-up or even leaving the house. Other people had fabulous birthdays with friends and family gathered around. Everyone would bring presents and have cake.

She had to hide. It would be nice to be as normal as she looked, at least for a day.

*That's what I'll do. I'll celebrate. I'll go out and be normal.*

She pulled out her comfortable jeans and a long sleeved brown shirt, which was tailored enough that Gershon might believe she would stay out all night, dancing in some club. She added a little make-up, and she was ready to go.

Instead of starving, she'd go out for a nice dinner, then follow it up with a shopping spree. It was her birthday after all. She wanted a present. Tomorrow Gershon would act normal, and she'd apologize for missing him.

Itana grabbed her purse and opened her door, stopping suddenly at the silver wrapped box left outside the door. There was a black ribbon with a small card stuck beneath.

*Happy Birthday.*

*I'm looking forward to our date.*

*Gershon*

She hadn't agreed to any date and didn't know how Gershon had found out today was her birthday. They'd had many conversations but it wasn't like she would come out and tell anyone her personal information. It had taken him months to learn her full name.

There was a present though. Grinning she took the box back inside and pulled off the black ribbon holding it closed. Inside was a silver choker with black accents and a teardrop hanging from the center. It was beautiful. She closed the box and left it on the coffee table.

When she opened her door again, a larger box sat on her doorstep. Startled, she looked down the hall, then tried to glance over the banister and down the steps. She couldn't see Gershon but the larger box hadn't been there the first time.

"Gershon?"

No one answered. She ran to her kitchen window and saw his light still on, his outline standing there. It didn't look like he'd been at her door, and there was no way for him to run across the lot, then pretend he hadn't moved.

She went back to the door and picked up the box. Another black ribbon held it closed. She pulled it, opening the lid to see a beautiful black dress. She held it up, letting it flow down her body. There wasn't much to it. The dress was backless, the front cut to a daring low. Despite its obvious charms, there was an air of elegance to it.

"You have interesting taste. I have to give you that."

For the third time she went to the door. She hesitated, hand on knob, unsure what would be waiting for her this time. Just to be on the safe side, she ran back to the kitchen window. There he stood. She waved casually. It probably looked like a thank you, but she wanted to make sure he was there and she hadn't mistaken something else for his form. He waved back though.

Convinced he hadn't moved, she went to the front door. This time, nothing sat in the hallway. She turned and locked the door, believing she could run to her car and be gone before Gershon could send anything else.

"Hello, Itana."

She turned, recognizing the voice instantly, but unwilling to accept who it belonged to. She'd just seen Gershon across the parking lot, but before she could speak, Gershon grabbed her. He pushed her against the wall, mouth moving closer, then pressing against hers. His lips were firm, demanding. His wicked tongue moved against her lips, passing

through to touch the sensitive parts within.

Itana had been kissed many times in her life, but nothing compared with what Gershon had done to her in that hallway. His body pressed against hers, one muscular thigh sliding between hers, spreading her while she felt his erection rub against her sensitive mound.

She tried to push against him but he took both her small wrists in one of his hands, holding them above her head. His other hand rested against her rib cage just below her breasts and for a brief moment she wished that hand would slide up, and caress her breast through her shirt.

Gershon was sexy, no doubt about it. From the first moment she'd met him, she'd wanted him. Now he was touching her, plundering her mouth in ways that made her thighs burn with desire. Every nerve ending came to life beneath his body and, for a minute, she didn't care what the consequences were. She wanted this man inside her.

He must've wanted her as badly. Gershon hadn't bothered dressing. He wore a leather jacket, no shirt, jeans, and his hair was still wet from a shower.

His mouth broke from hers, kissing a trail down her throat, unbuttoning her shirt and indulging in the flesh beneath. He reached the top of her breasts, causing need to flow through her body. She never remembered craving a man so much, needing to feel his lips encompass her nipple.

"We can't do this," she whispered breathless, wishing there were some way to end the worry Veris created.

"Why not? You want me." He said it as a statement of fact, never questioning her reaction. "Unlock the door. We don't need to do this in the hallway." Before she could protest, he took her soft flesh into his mouth, suckling her while one jean clad thigh rubbed against her.

"If we do this, I can never see you again."

He took the keys from her hand, unlocking the door and throwing it open. Then he looked at her, eyes going over her body, and her passion grew with a need she didn't know was possible.

"I can be faithful. I promise you that. You're the only one for me."

"That's not it." He unbuttoned her shirt, and tossed it into her apartment. One breast hung over the lacy cup, the other still covered in black lace. "Please, you have to listen to me. I'm not like other girls. This can't go anywhere."

The lace-covered nipple was taut, and he dropped his lips to it, teasing her through the bra. She didn't see him unfasten her pants, but felt it, heard the zipper slowly dropping until her black thong was visible.

"Don't be afraid of me," he whispered between her breasts. "I've given you time, now give me the chance to win you. I don't mind competing for your affections."

"I'm not afraid of you. He'll find me. Don't you see?" She wasn't making sense and she didn't care. He felt too good. She tried again to find the words to convey her situation. If only her body didn't throb with every touch. "Someone is after me. He tracks by scent. If I come, he might find me."

That got his attention. He stopped, his mouth at her hipbone. "What?"

She stood there, leaning against the doorjamb, breathing hard. Every nerve alive, pulsing, wanting release only Gershon could give. She was no virgin, but no man had ever made her so mad with desire.

"Come inside," she managed.

Gershon followed her. She didn't bother covering her bare breasts and wasn't sure when he'd taken her bra off. She found it by the door with her shirt.

"Who's after you?" He sat on the couch and motioned for her to join him.

"It doesn't matter." She rubbed her hands over her face. She'd never told anyone her secret, but when Gershon slid off his jacket, fully showing his muscled torso, she had to tell him before they made a terrible mistake. "I'm not like other women. When I was a child, a marriage was arranged. Not by my consent; it was more of a demand. Anyway, this guy can track me by scent. Actually by the scent I give off during orgasm." She hung her head, realizing how bizarre the story sounded. "It's the truth. I can't even masturbate. When I do give into temptation, I can't ever be with the man again for fear of what might happen."

"You're kidding." A half chuckle escaped his lips and the sound tore through her.

Itana reached for her shirt, not worrying about putting on a bra while Gershon watched. She'd opened up, told the truth, and now he didn't believe her. Not that she blamed him. Some days she couldn't believe it either.

"Stop." He pulled the shirt from her grasp. "What you're really worried about is having sex here then? Why don't we go someplace else?"

"Gershon, I like you. I don't know why, because I think you're an arrogant asshole."

The smirk on his face stopped her words. "I guess I was out of line earlier but I promised myself that I'd give you a year before taking you. No matter who you were with, I would stand at the sidelines and wait."

Again, he was speaking as if she were part of some plan. She was tired of men making plans without her consent. Desire was one thing, but waiting a year so he could date her sounded stranger than the troubles she carried.

"Whatever. Save your lines for some other bimbo. I know you. You have women every night, and once I saw you with two of them."

He grinned and she could've slapped his face. She'd never been more jealous than when she saw those women pull up with him in the backseat. He'd kept the shades open for that escapade. She'd caught glimpses of their shadowed foray from the kitchen window.

"I can't have a relationship for five more years, then I'm free. Go get one of your whores to suit you tonight."

"I can protect you from this man." Gershon leaned closer, circling first one nipple then the other with a warm tongue.

"I'm no good for you." She protested, but felt her back arch automatically to his wet mouth. "Please go."

His hand gripped the edges of her panties, jerking them down. She started to say something, anything, but when his mouth dove into her blond curls, licking her mound, nothing but moans came out.

She couldn't release. If she let go now, they couldn't even fuck. Oh, but his mouth felt so good. Her breathing came harder. She was so close that she had to pull away. She tried to scoot backwards, but he'd have no part of that.

"I'm not waiting another five years for you."

"I can't come."

"Really?" He'd taken it as a challenge and that wasn't how she'd intended it to be.

Itana knew many things existed in this world, some even stranger than she. She'd never met one face to face until she saw Gershon open his mouth to display two perfect fangs moments before imbedding them in the meat between her thigh and crotch. The sight surprised her, but he was too strong to get away from. His white teeth buried into her, and as he began to suck, she exploded. The orgasm was greater than anything she'd ever known, and had her rocking her body against his hungry face.

All at once, he leaned up, looked at her and wiping the blood from his lips with obvious distaste. He looked at the red smears on his hand. "What the hell are you?"

"I don't know." Tears filled her eyes. She didn't know why. Gershon wouldn't bother her again and the idea of having him was gone. Still she wanted to curl into a ball and sob. "I'm a freak."

He crawled up and lay on top of her, petting her tears away. She didn't want to look at him and closed her eyes. Gershon kissed each brow, then leaned close to her ear, leaving hot breath in his wake.

"You're not a freak or maybe we both are. For whatever reason, you are supposed to be mine. True bloods know these things."

She wrapped an arm around him. "True bloods?"

"Born vampires. Ones that aren't created."

He slid between her thighs. She wasn't sure when he'd taken off his pants, but his naked cock pressed against her thigh, his chest lightly rubbing her breasts as he edged closer to her mound.

"We can't. I already came. If we do it again, there's no telling what will happen."

"Shh. We have to make love for you to understand. If we have to run away tomorrow, then so be it."

All at once, he was inside her. His engorged cock pressing through her wet folds to claim her. She shuddered, taking him, wanting every inch inside her. Itana lifted her hips and pleasure, exquisite and hot, rushed through her core. Never had a man felt so good.

Gershon eased out, then back in, the slow pace teasing her senses. She helped, sheathing him, fucking him back. Her movements must've excited him because his pace increased, pushing harder, trying to go through her. His fangs showed long and bright while his hips rubbed then pushed. She wanted to come on his cock, to feel his teeth, to be so truly part of him they could never really separate.

Her hips took on motion of their own, but as her climax started, she froze. Twice in a night was dangerous. There was no teasing Gershon though. His body slammed into hers with an unrelenting force. His flesh pressed against hers and his pace became too fast, too hard, creating an exquisite pressure that stole her control. She screamed out, coming over him, knowing it was wrong, and not caring. Her nails dug into his back, feeling so much that the pleasure nearly crossed over to pain.

"Gershon," she moaned like a dying woman.

When she was able to open her eyes, she saw his. Glowing, gleaming a strange red. Vampires were strange animals and Gershon was the most exotic lover she'd ever have. He hadn't even broken a sweat. He dislodged himself long enough to flip her over, resting her hips on the couch pillows then climbing behind her.

"Vampires fuck their mates into submission. You will be mine."

His words were arousing, threatening, as he raised her hips to his. She wanted it though. There was no thought about tomorrow as his smooth shaft rubbed against her

thigh then slid back inside. His body molded against her back. Sweet flesh rubbed over her and when his pace increased, his balls slapped against her.

"Mine. Mine." His words kept going and his thrusts kept pushing her closer to an edge she couldn't cross. "Don't you hold back on me, Itana."

Again she tried to fight the release, letting it build to a maddening height. Every moment grew more intense. His fingers knew where to get her, sliding to her swollen clit, flicking her until she couldn't take anymore. She bit the pillow, tried to think about taxes and news reports, but nothing would calm the torrent inside. The muscled beast on her back wouldn't permit her protest. His cock pulsed deep in her mound, his hips slamming against her ass, and the last flick on her sensitive bud pushed her beyond her limits. There was no way to control it, to stop. The sweetest release of her life washed over her. Gershon sank his fangs into the side of her neck and made her release again. This time his seed filled her, cool and binding.

"Itana, my love."

Gershon withdrew. She was more than satisfied, but he left an emptiness in her. Their flesh was supposed to be joined. More hot tears filled her, spilling on the throw pillow. He must've heard her tears, because he paused, then kissed her back. His hands stroked her softly, and she loved him for his gentleness.

"What have I done?" she whimpered.

"You're about to be my wife." He slid from the couch and sat on the floor by her face. She saw one of his nails extend, becoming claw like. "Drink." He cut his wrist and nearly black blood oozed from the cut. "No one can touch you if you're my wife."

"I'm not human, Gershon."

"There's no blood more powerful than a vampire's. You will be my eternal mate. Don't believe the myths. Sunlight won't destroy you and people won't die in your wake. I've fed thousands of times and never killed anyone." He held his wrist close to her mouth. "I'm not crazy about garlic but you can still enjoy food now and then. It's the best of both worlds."

"It's not the myths that frighten me."

The door flew open, cool wind filling the room. Gershon pulled back and she saw the incision instantly heal. He stood in front of her, readying for whatever unseen attack came with the breeze.

"Relax. It's my twin brother." Itana stood and grabbed her clothes from the floor. "Don't you ever knock, Alard?"

"I don't see anyone." Gershon spun around. He pulled on his pants, glancing around the room then peering out the windows for the source of the sound.

Itana held back a giggle. She'd known Gershon was arrogant and by all rights she supposed most vampires would be. They thought they were top of the food chain, nearly godlike among mortal men. She doubted many ever realized what other creatures lurked in the night.

"Alard didn't develop as well as I did. He never got a body." Itana shrugged, loving the confused look on Gershon's face. "What? I thought vampires knew about everything." She smiled. "Alard, this is Gershon."

"Gershon? He doesn't seem right." Alard grew as dense as he could manage, becoming a silver wisp in the room, nothing more than a ghostly outline. "What is he?"

"I'm a vampire. Your sister's husband."

To his credit, Gershon sounded threatening, but Alard laughed the threat away. It was good to hear Alard laugh. His life had been much harder than Itana's. He could only watch existence from the outside. His life was a shadow, a shade of something not quite born.

"When did you get married?" Alard blew by Gershon and he shivered noticeably.

"I didn't. Maybe. It's complicated."

"It better get uncomplicated real quick. I felt a shift in the fabrics. He must be coming through." Alard waved a ghostly hand in front of his face. "It reeks of sex. You'd better move it." Alard turned back to Gershon. "I don't think you know what you've gotten yourself into."

Itana slid into her clothes as Gershon shook off the shock and apparent repulsion. He grabbed his jacket from the floor. Looking at both Alard and Itana, he gave one unconvinced shake of his head then grabbed her purse from the floor and tossed it to her.

"We'd better go then."

Itana had never told a man the truth, and she never expected Gershon to want her when faced with so many bizarre problems. The sexy man could have any woman he wanted, women with a future. Instead he looked at her as if he really believed she was the only woman for him. Maybe she was. At this point, after having him inside her, she'd believe anything.

"Are you sure you don't want to run away from me and never look back?"

"Come on. Let's get on my motorcycle. Tell your brother to meet up with us later."

Gershon grabbed her and started pulling her to the door. Even panicked, she loved the feel of his hand on hers. This could never work though. Their only chance was for her to disappear. He didn't seem willing to release her and there wasn't time to argue.

"We can go to your apartment. As long as you behave yourself, it will buy us some time."

They started running to the door. She couldn't keep up, Gershon was very fast. Gershon scooped her into his arms and ran down the stairs at a blinding speed. The next thing she knew, they were at his apartment door.

"How did you do that?"

"I may not have invisible family members, but I do have a few skills."

He opened the door to the darkest place she'd ever seen. This was the first glimpse she'd ever gotten of her handsome neighbor's home. His carpet was the only light colored item. The couch, coffee table, even the curtains were deep black. Candles sat on every surface, even near the windows.

"Living up to the stereotype?" She couldn't resist. If ever a denizen of the night were to occupy an apartment, this would be it.

"Very cute. At least I can have sex without people hunting me down."

"Speaking of that, we'd better shower."

He set her on the floor, then led her to a bathroom with the same layout as her own. Again darkness prevailed in the décor. His bathtub was black marble with a tub and toilet to match. The walls were beige, or light would've been swallowed completely.

At the moment, she wasn't going to complain. He started the shower, then opened the door to let her in first, then slid into the warm water behind her.

Gershon looked magnificent in the streamlets running down his body. He soaped up and she followed the foam over his skin wishing they had more time to play. His pale

skin was free of hair until his cock where it made a neat dark circle surrounding his dominant feature. She licked her lips and dropped to her knees, tasting him.

"Is that wise?"

"No." She stopped and licked her lips. "I couldn't help myself. Sorry."

She took the soap from his hands and washed away the evidence of their love making. Gershon had finished showering but stayed to watch, careful not to touch. His appreciative gaze was still exciting. She had to get better control of herself with Veris arriving any minute.

As she stepped from the shower, the earth shook. With towels wrapped around them, she followed Gershon to the kitchen window. The sun hadn't set yet, but that didn't diminish the horrors happening in the building across the parking lot.

Bright flashes of red filled the windows. Something dark passed in front of the glass and both she and Gershon ducked. A loud blast shook the building, knocking several of his candles to the floor and one silver framed picture from the wall. For an incredibly pale man, Gershon grew ghostly. Probably as a reflex, his nails extended along with those grand teeth. She wouldn't be surprised if he turned Catholic and crossed himself. She reached over and held his hand. Itana imagined that vampires were afraid of very little. If Gershon had ever known true terror before today, she'd never know but she was sure he understood the emotion now.

Another flash, bright enough to light his apartment, filled the sky. Veris was throwing fits, taking everything apart in his attempts to find her. She never should've gone back inside her apartment.

It grew quiet outside. Gershon started to rise, but she pulled him back and shook her head no. Veris wasn't finished. He'd waited for her for years and his time to claim her grew short. Since the moment puberty hit her, she'd seen his searches. Luckily, she'd always outrun him.

A hum filled the air and she knew the black lights were coming. It was how he finished checking an area. Sure enough, black touched the windows, flowing through like a single wall, enveloping everything in its path. It knew every fork in the room, knew Gershon. That strange six inch thick mass memorized everything to report back to Veris, except it couldn't see her.

She put on her clothes, not wanting to make a fast exit wearing Gershon's towel. He did the same, dressing as the dark wall went through them, then continued through the other wall. Gershon visibly trembled and she feared he'd speak. She touched one finger to his lips. He jumped slightly but settled with her touch. Speaking her name during the black lights would bring Veris there.

Five more minutes passed and the black lights came back, moving faster this time. Veris would be disappointed again. She had no idea how far those lights went but it had to be miles. Tomorrow there would be reports of aliens or blackouts in the area. Who knew how many people that wall had gone through and terrified?

Gershon looked at her but she again touched his lips. It wasn't safe to speak yet. They waited. A few more minutes passed before she felt a vacuum and the change in the atmosphere. Still she didn't dare move. When a wind came into the apartment, she knew everything was safe.

"Come on out." Alard once again tried to make himself visible, probably for Gershon's sake.



Gershon looked at Itana. She wished she could take the fear from his eyes, take away the uncertainty flowing through him. There was no way to do it. Surely, he would ask her to leave, to get away and never come near him again. Lead filled her stomach as she waited for the words she feared.

“Are you okay?” she asked, afraid of what he’d say but unable to stand the silence any longer.

“Not really, but I’ll adjust.” He smiled and she saw his fangs retract. “What was that black thing?”

“A type of search beam, a mental force. It analyzes everything in the room. He was trying to see if I was hiding nearby.” She touched his hand again, mostly to see if he’d pull away from her. “My mother took certain precautions to make me normal. Those precautions hide me.” She lifted her left wrist, showing a rectangular patch in her arm just beneath the skin. She tapped it. “Pure silver, blessed by a priest. There is some inscription on it too, but I don’t remember what it is. I was just a kid when it was inserted.”

“That explains the strange taste.” He stuck his tongue out. “Not yummy.”

Funny, she never worried about the silver making her unappetizing. Guess it was better to leave a bad taste in Gershon’s mouth than to have Veris find her. Of course, Gershon may not agree.

“Oops. Is silver bad for vampires?”

“It might give me heartburn.” He shrugged and she saw what little color he had return to his face. “Well, Alard, what do we do now?”

Alard crossed the room, leaving cold air in his wake. “I wish I could defend you, Itana.” She saw him sulk onto the black couch. “I can’t even throw a decent punch.” It was true. Alard couldn’t hold anything that weighed more than a couple of pounds before it fell through his hand. In a fight, although Alard couldn’t be harmed, he could do no more damage than a fly.

“Dear brother, I wish I could give you flesh. Then you could run and hide like the rest of us.” She grinned, but the smile he returned was filled with chagrin.

Itana stood and looked out the window. Veris had left his mark. Her apartment building was nothing more than a hull, jagged bits of concrete and metal hung from the opening where her outer wall used to be.

“I’m glad it’s the neighbor’s bingo night. This might’ve given her a heart attack.” Gershon put his arm around Itana. “Alard, how safe are we here?”

“I wouldn’t stay long. Veris came across the dimension as energy. If he thinks Itana is close, he’ll bring foot soldiers. A little piece of silver won’t fool them.” Alard hovered closer to Gershon. “If they see you with her, they’ll do worse things than kill you.”

Gershon looked disbelievingly at Alard, then back at the remnants of Itana’s apartment. “Then I guess we should leave.”

This might be too much, even for Gershon. No one was truly immortal and Veris knew everyone’s weaknesses. He was an old creature. That age had brought madness and enough knowledge to make him dangerous.

“I can’t let you leave with me, Gershon.” Itana rubbed her neck where he’d bitten her. It was still sore but the mark had vanished. She wished it were permanent, something to remind her of him. “It’s too dangerous. Take a vacation. In a few weeks, it should be safe here.”

She took a deep breath and motioned for Alard to come with her. Her brother didn't budge, only looked at her as if she spoke some foreign tongue. He was being stubborn again. It didn't matter. Whatever his gifts were, Alard was always able to find her. Good thing Veris couldn't.

Itana shrugged then started to the door. She glanced back at Alard, wondering what made him sit with the vampire instead of leaving with her. Perhaps Alard finally found someone he approved of. She started to say something to them but Gershon vanished, leaving Alard alone. It was for the best. She didn't think she could stand really saying goodbye. Tears blurred her vision as she turned back around to leave and walked into Gershon.

"What the ... I didn't see you go past me. How did you do that?"

"Vampires are fast, dear lady. Whether you want to accept it or not, you are to be my mate. That means you are coming with me." He looked at her brother, a silver specter more tangible looking against the black couch. "Find us when you can, Alard."

Alard nodded.

Before Itana could utter one word in protest, Gershon hoisted her into his arms. Another blink brought them to the parking lot. One minute she was looking at her brother on the couch, the next a black motorcycle helmet was being shoved on her head.

"Watch the ears."

"Sorry. I know a place we can go."

He climbed on the bike first, she slipped onto the seat behind him. The angle of the seat brought her body close to his and she wrapped her arms around him. Together they took off into the night and not a moment too soon. In the jagged open mouth that used to be her home, she saw more light. This was tangible. Veris had sent foot soldiers. Every available building would be searched. Her scent was probably so strong in that apartment that it had made Veris incensed, smelling her and not finding her.

As they turned onto the main road, she saw the police. The commotion should've roused someone, but she had no idea anyone lived close enough to report it. The blue lights racing past them told a different story.

She hugged Gershon tighter. It was terrible to rely on someone else for survival, but Gershon made her enjoy it. Playing the damsel in distress had a few rewards, like not having to plan, to figure out what to do, or where to go.

They had no future together, whatever Gershon said. Whenever he touched her, they would have to run for their lives. Not exactly a great relationship. For now it would work though. At least she didn't feel lonely, and that was a miracle. Too many years had gone by with no one for company except the occasional visits from her ghost brother or some barfly she'd enjoy.

The wind whipped around her and her shirt blew against her body, letting the cold air touch her skin. She'd be frozen if they rode for long, but as long as they got away from Veris, she would be okay. At least tonight she would be okay.

### Chapter Three

Morning came, at least morning for Gershon. The clock said it was closer to four in the afternoon. He rolled over and found Itana snuggled against him, both of them under the tacky motel room comforter that kept trying to slide off the bed.

*Not human?*

It never occurred to him that someone like her could exist. Not that he knew what she was yet. He knew of vampires, of course, humans, werewolves, zombies, and he had met a few witches who weren't very powerful. He'd never tasted anything like her. Although the silver could be masking her true flavor.

He supposed he would have to challenge this Veris character for her hand. First he had to figure out what Veris was, along with his reluctant bride. There was only one person he knew that might have an idea, Conrad. The old Russian was several thousand years old with an outstanding reference library. If anyone had a shot at helping them, Conrad would.

Gershon reached over and touched Itana's face. It was silky smooth, like a lady's should be. Her body beneath him felt like a woman's. There was nothing different about her, but she was convinced there was. The taste of silver in her blood threw him. Surely she was something unique if her mother would go to those lengths. If she were to be his wife, though, that metal would have to come out.

She moved a little beneath the covers, splaying blond hair along the pillow. His heart knew that she was meant to be his from the first moment he'd seen Itana look at her apartment. She'd been standoffish, so he'd waited to approach, and afterwards, enjoyed the friendship they'd developed. There were times he was insanely jealous, knowing she'd stayed the night with some man, someone across town who didn't know where she lived. One morning she'd come home with some man's scent heavy on her skin. He'd gone out that night, fucking and feeding from three women, trying to relieve his aggressions.

Now she was in his bed and he'd never let her run away. She'd been his obsession. They say distance makes the heart grow fonder; well, holding something just out of reach could make a man insane.

Normally vampires took their brides. A woman wouldn't know what had happened until she grew fangs of her own. There were those that considered humans the equivalent of naughty toddlers. They'd get over whatever issues a forced union created. Besides, it guaranteed a mate for a lifetime, even if that lifetime was spent begging forgiveness for turning them, sometimes having raped them to achieve the turn. Vampires were arrogant. He could say it without fault because he'd been born one and never understood there were limits to his strength. Until he saw the remnants of Itana's apartment.

He wouldn't force Itana into anything. He'd considered sliding into her bed and her waking as his wife, but she was special. She deserved more than the confusion and disrespect a forced turning would bring. Even though he considered her a mortal, he'd never thought her beneath him.

It was a good thing too. If he'd mesmerized Itana before taking her, he would've met Veris without knowing who he was or why he was there. Waiting was the right choice. It

was okay that she knew about vampires without being turned; at least he hoped so.

His actions would be criticized either way. Vampires were never supposed to let it be known that they existed. It was the first rule taught to him as a child. The teachers at their special schools would show the bizarre vampire movies where his kind would skulk around in the shadows, murdering people like savage monsters only to be destroyed by a cross or daylight. Telling or showing someone that vampires were real risked everyone's existence. Goths would drain vampires in order to try to become vampires, and religious fanatics would start staking graves. No good would come from public knowledge.

Surely the council wouldn't punish him for not turning Itana. It wasn't like he'd let a human find out. He'd still feel better if he knew what she was. It would also make this easier to explain if the council became aware of his transgression.

*I wish everything didn't have to be secretive.*

The human world would never accept vampires. Hiding was easy. Vampire children aged normally until their twenty-fifth year. It was the time of maturity. Some looked closer to thirty but Gershon would never mention it. Vampires were vain; well, the ones he knew were.

Feedings didn't begin until puberty. Contrary to the movies, vampires only needed to feed every week or so, depending on how much energy they used. To further protect vampire children, they normally went to private school. They were usually Catholic schools. No, no one would ever understand that vampires had religion.

Many vampires held jobs in public office. There was a directory of those handling vampire affairs. Vampires had adapted to fit the modern world. Every so often tax records, social security numbers, and even driver's licenses had to be altered since vampires didn't age. He knew of several that were senators. They'd used the old ways to make them appear older. All vampires could manage basic physical shifting, but keeping up the appearances would drain a vampire quickly. It wouldn't be good to see a senator feeding on an intern's throat. He could imagine that on the six o'clock news.

Humans seemed too eager to need a villain, something scary to go bump in the night. Most vampires feared humans. They bred like roaches and sometimes numbers could overcome any special gifts. Vampires only had a child every hundred years or so. It was a fact that a true blood could turn a human, but the conditions had to be right.

He looked down at Itana. Could he turn her? Until he found out what she really was, he couldn't be sure. Vampire blood was the strongest contagion. Nothing else overcame it, but it could hurt her too.

"What are you?" he whispered.

Seeing her in bed next to him made him want to touch her, feel her naked body against him. It was better to let her sleep. The ride to New York would be long. Conrad lived there and that's where the council convened. Just bringing Itana to see Conrad was breaking more laws than he cared to think about. There was no other choice though. His love was in danger and he would protect her no matter the cost.

*Could she get sick like a human? Did her wounds heal quickly? Was she mortal?*

This and a thousand other questions circulated through his mind. He tried to hold onto them, pushing the image of her naked body away so he wouldn't summon this Veris again. It was a challenge. No matter her taste or that odd vanilla smell that came with her, she was his mate.

The temptation to kiss her grew too much. He lowered himself next to her, brushing

his lips across her cheek. She breathed deeper and he kissed her again. This time she opened her eyes.

“Good morning.”

She smiled and any doubts he had vanished. “What time is it?”

“Time to get going.” It hadn’t occurred to him, but he bet she had to eat food. He ate food but only to enjoy the taste. She probably needed it for survival. “Do I need to get you breakfast?”

“Breakfast would be good.” She ran her hand down his chest and caused desire to flood his senses. “I can grab something out of the machine in the breezeway.”

“Okay.” He tried to relax but with her bed-rumpled hair and half naked body, all he could think of was riding her.

“Your fangs?”

“Oh, sorry.” He closed his mouth, pulling his lips tight around his teeth. “When I’m aroused or hungry, they elongate. I hope you don’t mind.”

She leaned closer, the shirt she wore riding high on her thighs. “I think they’re sexy.”

There was an innocence to her voice. She kissed him, soft sweet lips touching his and he wrapped his arms around her. They couldn’t make love, not here. Even if they left immediately, Veris would demolish the motel and harm innocent people.

“I need a shower.” He pulled away. “A cold one.”

He looked back at Itana, the covers pushed away from her body. Her nipples showed through the thin fabric of her shirt and he’d never wanted anyone more. This would require patience though. A lot of patience.

“I’m going to check out the vending machine. I’ll be back before you’re out.”

Gershon stopped at the bathroom door, watching her put on her bra then pants. There had to be a way to make this work. There was always a way. For now he’d have to be content jerking off in the shower.

\* \* \* \*

The temperature wasn’t intolerable for autumn. The chill seemed to fade, until she turned the corner and the concrete breezeway lived up to its name. A hard gust of wind caught her by surprise, stinging Itana’s eyes for a minute. Once it subsided, she went to the lit up vending machine. There wasn’t much inside. A candy bar for breakfast wouldn’t do. In the bottom row she found a six pack of mini powdered doughnuts. After dropping another buck into the machine next to it, she had a Pepsi. Sounded like the breakfast of champions to her.

She couldn’t imagine traveling for long on the back of a motorcycle. Too bad she hadn’t thought to bring her coat from the apartment. Last night had chilled her to the bone and this wind wasn’t helping things. Wanting to feel the sun on her face, she went around to the front of the motel.

The parking lot was fairly deserted. A few cars sat parked with no one inside them. Given the time of day, most people should be checking in. This side of town didn’t cater to families so maybe the masses waited for nightfall to get a room for the night.

“Hey, Sis.”

Itana had been so lost in thought that she hadn’t noticed her brother arrive. She rarely saw which direction he came from, but she usually realized his presence before he spoke.

“Alard. What’s going on?” She leaned against the building, hoping no one saw her

talking to thin air. Of course around here, that may not be too unusual.

“Veris went through five blocks before calling in his people. The radio reports had a rash of gang violence plaguing the town last night. You should’ve seen his henchmen. They tried to blend, muscled bound freaks dressed in black, toting swords of all things. No one was seriously injured.” He touched Itana. She felt it like static electricity. “What are you gong to do?”

“I don’t know. Start over I guess.” She opened the pack of doughnuts, biting and watching the bits of white fall onto her shirt. “I might go to Charlotte. I need a decent sized city to work in.”

“What about Gershon?”

She didn’t know what to say about Gershon. The responsible thing to do would be to run like hell and never say goodbye. Doing it was another matter. It was so nice waking up with a man. She’d never done that before. There were no mad dashes to the door or awkward excuses to explain why she couldn’t leave her number.

“Do you want the truth, or a lie?”

“Itana, don’t play games. It’s not nice to do to the fleshless.”

The fleshless, she hated when he referred to himself that way. It was demeaning. She didn’t like it much better when he called her a fleshy, that sounded fat. After all these years, she was certain he only did it to annoy her.

“I want to stay with him but he would be safer if I left. I don’t know what to do. I’m so fucking tired of all this. Why can’t I have a normal life?”

She heard laughter tinged with so much pain it brought tears to her eyes. Complaining to a man that had been born without flesh was hardly fair. He couldn’t have a life being slightly more than soul and much less than living.

“Because our mother fucked something, something she shouldn’t have.”

Neither knew who or what their father had been. She wasn’t even sure what she’d look like without the silver in her arm. It wasn’t human; she knew that much. Only Alard had memories of her without the silver and he would never describe it.

“I need your advice. Tell me brother, should I run away now and never look back?”

“Do you want the truth or a lie, Fleshy?”

“That’s my line. You know I want the truth.”

“Fuck Gershon until he can’t walk, then put him someplace safe. Slit your wrist and pull that blasphemed metal out of your arm. When you’re in true form, wait for Veris then cut his balls off.”

“What if I’m not strong enough? You’ve seen Veris. He has so much power.”

She didn’t remember what Veris looked like, she’d only seen shadows. His abilities frightened her. She remembered white hands coming out from the darkness, taunting voices, and her mother crying. Veris could appear anywhere at any time through a dimensional door. Mom had described it as secret passages only he could open and only he knew about. Somewhere through the darkness, he had an army.

Understanding that there were other dimensions wasn’t much of a stretch. Horrible things were imagined by every child who believed monsters appeared under the bed and in the closet whenever the lights were turned out. For an adult to believe, it was a more terrifying thing because adults could reason.

It was funny to think that so many never realized what really lived in the shadows. She knew it for sure. No one could make the nightmare go away or turn on the light to

show her the shadows were just clothes hanging in the closet. Things crossed from their world to this one, and one of them wanted to breed her.

"I don't think you can keep going like this. Itana, even if you ran from Gershon, he'd follow. That man would go through hell and back for you." He touched her cheek again. "I've also seen the way you look at him. You don't want to hurt him. That was probably the only reason you haven't gotten involved with Gershon before now."

"Alard, what do I look like without the silver in my arm?"

He smiled, wispy smoke clinging where his lips should be. "You were a beautiful creature of night. At least that's how I remember you, but that was a lifetime ago. What does it matter?"

"I am only fully human with this in my arm. What if I don't look human when I take it out?"

"Then you'll know for certain if Gershon loves you."

Itana smacked at him but her hand hit the building. He chuckled but still took a step away. Not having a body had certain advantages. He never got sick, never knew pain, and couldn't be punched, although she'd tried on several occasions.

"Great, you've gone philosophical on me."

"Don't make your decision now. Wait. Spend some time with Gershon."

That much she could do.

"Speaking of Gershon, I should get back inside. Love you, bro."

"You too."

Alard was gone. She often wondered where he spent his days. Occasionally he'd mention a lovely road or bit of ocean he visited. Nothing more than scenery. He told her once that he'd visited a place at the exact moment a bomb had gone off. It sounded so disturbing that she couldn't understand why he would want to be there. He told her that it was beautiful to watch souls climb to the heavens, blissfully turning into colors of light. Maybe he could find a ghost to date. For whatever reason, his bodiless form wasn't able to find peace or heaven.

*What in the world was our father?*

Itana opened the motel room door. Gershon was dressed, drying his hair in front of the mirror, his muscled body slightly damp, making his shirt cling in the right places. He looked like a sculpture, too perfect to be real.

"Alard stopped by."

"I heard." He stopped and set the towel on the counter. "Were you really thinking of ditching me?"

She knew the walls were thin here, but she had no idea how much until now. Gershon looked deeply hurt, muscles tense. There would be no goodbyes with him. She couldn't face that expression of pain again.

"I didn't expect you to listen in on my conversation."

"Vampires have excellent hearing."

He came forward and led her to the bed. She put what was left of her breakfast on the side table. Whatever she'd gotten into with Gershon, walking away wouldn't be easy. His emotions tangled with hers in a way that pulled them together. She'd felt it before, but watching him made it undeniable.

"I'm taking you to New York. I have a friend there who may give us some options. Can I trust you to stay with me, or am I going to have to start tying you to the bed?"

When she didn't respond, he continued. "I don't want to wake up alone."

"I don't want you to get hurt, Gershon."

"Promise me that you won't leave until we've looked at this from all the angles." He gripped both of her shoulders and his blue eyes changed to something darker and more dangerous. "Promise me."

She didn't want to make that promise, but there was no other choice unless she was willing to hurt him. "I promise I won't leave until we know our options."

Gershon pulled her into his arms. His warm embrace made the fears vanish into nothing. All that mattered was him, here and now. Besides, what harm could a few days together cause?

His lips touched her brow, her nose, and lastly her lips. He was careful, trying to contain the passion they both knew bubbled beneath the surface. To enjoy his touch might condemn them, although it was all she longed for.

"Go take a shower, get ready."

"Are we heading out tonight?"

"No." He nuzzled her neck. "You can't ride with me to New York without a coat. I think we'll do a little shopping and get a fresh start tomorrow. As long as we behave, Veris won't know where we are."

It sounded reasonable. She didn't know how they could behave. The slightest contact from him made her think of them together, his cock entering her body, his teeth on her flesh. She felt her body grow moist and tried to squelch the thought. They couldn't have sex here.

"So you want us to go shopping and try like hell to keep from ripping each other's clothes off?"

"It should be easier to do in public. Not the ripping off clothes, the behaving part." He grinned and she saw his fangs again. She looked at his pants, and found something more interesting elongate. "We come back here to sleep a few hours before hitting the road. We should be gone by checkout tomorrow."

"Being together and not being together won't be easy."

"I know. Maybe we could find a deserted spot or two for a quickie."

"Quickie? Only until we get our problem solved. I don't want you to get used to quickies."

She went to the bathroom and started running the shower. The room was already steamy from Gershon but she still waited a moment before getting into the tub. The square mark of silver in her arm seemed to stand out more today. It was almost as if it longed to be released, to free Itana of her mortal prison. It also itched like hell.

Itana wiped the mirror and looked at herself. She was considered beautiful by human standards. Half of her must be beautiful, but what did the other half look like? Would she have the same appearance when the silver was gone? Alard hinted at her being a creature of night, but his riddles meant nothing to her. She was tired of being a creature. All she wanted was to be Itana.

"What am I?" she asked the reflection.

She gripped the sink while standing there and for a moment a vision of black eyes, darker than night surrounded by blond hair filled her mind. She jerked her eyes open, startled. Was that what she was?

So many times she'd been tempted to pull the silver from her arm, but Veris would



sense her immediately. On lonely nights, that even sounded reasonable. Plucking the silver would cause her to meet Veris. She considered the slim chance that he wouldn't be such a terrible husband. At those moments of weakness, terror would fill her at the thought and she realized that whatever instincts survived being human told her Veris would make no good husband.

"What do I do?"

"You take a shower and quit talking to yourself," Gershon's voice bellowed from outside the door.

"Bite me, asshole."

"It would be my pleasure."

She wished he could come through the door and pleasure her. An eternity seemed to have passed since he'd been inside her. She longed to have him, to feel his body writhing above, hers stretching to accept his cock.

Her thighs jerked together, the emptiness between them a physical ache. He was right. Dallying in front of the mirror wasn't helping anything.

## Chapter Four

The restaurant wasn't crowded. That much Itana was thankful for. She couldn't deal with crowds, screaming kids or horny old men leering at her from behind their menus. A simple meal with her boyfriend, how normal, and it was wonderful.

Gershon looked up from his plate as if reading her mind. He picked up a glass of tea and sipped. To look at them, you'd never know he was a vampire and she a misfit stalked for breeding.

"I thought your kind didn't eat food." She waited until he had a mouthful.

"Common misconception." He covered his mouth, finishing the bite. "Most that are turned choose not to eat. Pure bloods enjoy food once in a while. We eat when we're children." He shrugged then put down his fork. "Many give up the habit because it means going to the bathroom. None of us like that. Speaking of which, if you'll excuse me." He stood and walked down the aisle toward the restroom sign.

She watched him walk away. He had a presence to him, drawing eyes. However, when they'd gone shopping, everyone avoided him, as if never really noticing Gershon. She supposed it was another vampiric gift, to go unnoticed when willed.

Gershon had taken her to a nice restaurant, but all she'd wanted was a cheeseburger. It hit the spot. She looked at her empty plate, wondering how in the world she'd eaten so much. Nerves, she supposed.

Itana closed her eyes a moment, listening to the sounds around her. People murmured, glasses clinked, a fork screeched across the plate. They were all noises associated with humans, and with only half of her.

Suddenly, she heard a sound she hadn't expected. Someone growled and it wasn't Gershon's sexy sound. This reminded her of a Rottweiler crossed with an angry cat. Her eyes jerked open as she looked around the room. At first she couldn't find anyone, then the growl came again. She turned her head to find one of them sitting in the booth behind her.

She'd never seen one of Veris's henchmen up close, but she'd bet anything that the growling, drooling beast staring at her was one of those creatures. Its nose was long, almost doglike as the mouth extended to meet it. The eyes were black with red irises. Fangs, looking more like bore's tusks, hung out from its bottom lip.

Her voice left her, although all she wanted to do was scream. The terrifying beast licked its lips, carefully going around the tusks. All at once the creature looked like a man, short dark hair, normal features. The smile gave away something. Human men didn't have that evil in their smiles.

"Everything okay?" asked Gershon as he walked up.

The henchmen must have some gift to stay hidden around others. Whether it was a mask or a shape shift, she had no idea. The human looking man kept her frightened, and the silent terror was only broken when Gershon touched her arm and she remembered to breathe.

"Is that guy bothering you?"

"We have to go now."

Itana grabbed his hand and both ran to the door. It was a good thing he'd already

paid the check or more people would've noticed their rapid departure. They reached the bike before she dared to look back at the restaurant. She hoped he would be sitting menacingly in his booth. He wasn't. It frightened her more when she couldn't see him at the window or even entering the parking lot.

"Veris's man was inside. That was him at the table." She kept looking around. He had to come out of the restaurant. Surely, Veris wouldn't allow him to travel through the dark doors or he'd reappear anywhere.

"Where did he go?" Gershon had time to ask, before being pushed onto his back.

The man from the restaurant toppled him, seeming to appear from the air. Panicked, Itana searched the area for more of the beasts. An army of them could appear, unless this was a lone henchman on patrol. Itana noticed marks on the roof so he probably came from there, leaving the restaurant by some back door or window before scaling to the top and jumping onto Gershon. At least he hadn't freely traveled between worlds.

The two rolled down the small hill to a section between buildings. The need for a disguise vanished. The man's snapping jaws came at Gershon, trying to impale and bite him at the same time. The creature had claws and one slashed through the air, aiming for Gershon's throat.

Itana ran down the hill. She didn't know what she could do, but there was no way that that thing was going to take Gershon. Running, she caught up to them. She was ready to jump on the creature's back when Gershon reached the beast's throat.

It was a beautiful and violent sort of dance. Gershon brought his knee between them, pushing the creature up and flipping it onto the ground. Claws extended from Gershon's hands and with the skill of a butcher, he took the thing's head off with two swipes of the deadly hands. Black blood sprayed up, then vanished into dirt along with the creature it had come from.

She stood, frozen once again by the extraordinary circumstances. Gershon stood tall, leaned back with hands outstretched, and growled low and dominating into the night. His eyes were wild, glowing gold and red at the same time. The image frightened her yet at the same time aroused her.

It made no sense, and a shrink would have a field day with it, but she had to have her hero. She wanted him in a way that could only be felt. When his gaze fell on her, frightening and real, she knew, consequences be damned, she had to have him.

"Take me," she whispered, but he still heard.

He said nothing understandable, just a series of growls. Whatever being her DNA had been combined with loved that sound, the sound of power. Her thighs jerked together, heat flowing through her like madness. He had to feel it too. His eyes were dark, wild with passion. He grabbed her and they traveled between the buildings to a deserted dead end alley at the back of the restaurant.

There was no one around, although Itana didn't think she could stop even if there had been. They ran together, passing a dumpster and finding cover under a fire escape. She saw no exit here. Everything dead-ended, protecting them from the street.

Gershon wasn't gentle, ripping her clothes from her body and tossing them to the asphalt. Above them, lighting flashed and thunder rolled through the air. Rain started coming down as he freed her breasts, shredding the lace bra and snapping the elastic. Cold rain pelted her naked flesh, but with the heat from her body, it felt good.

His warm mouth consumed her nipple while rain ran down her other breast. Her

jeans were wet, but he pulled them off, sloshing them to the pavement next to her shoes. Naked, she felt the bricks against her back and buttocks. He was in no hurry though.

He slid off his jacket, but nothing else. With one strong hand, he pushed her to her knees and she knew what he wanted. In the building puddle she knelt, unzipped his pants, and released his length. His long hard cock glistened in the water. She eagerly put her lips on it, bringing the shaft into her mouth. He moved his hips forward, nearly choking her, but she wanted it, no matter how uncomfortable. Gershon kept his hand in her hair, guiding her head back and forth along his cock. She started to chill with the water splashing her knees, running down her back. Soon his thrusts grew harder, bringing him too far into her throat. At once, he released his seed spilling down her throat in a sweet climax. For a moment she couldn't breathe, then she sucked him dry and licked away the last drop.

Itana thought his climax would slake his passions, ending their play. Her need not close to satiated, she reached down to her folds, touching her mound and slipping her fingers inside. Her actions seemed to agitate Gershon. He moved her hand and when she defied him, touching her clit, he lifted her, wrapped her rain-slicked legs around his waist. Her slit was wet, needy. Not waiting, he slid immediately into her folds. The pure volume of him made her come, and the world exploded around them in an unreal series of color. She shuddered, thighs gripping him, unwilling to relax until her climax had finished. As the rush slowed, she looked at Gershon and knew he was far from finished with her.

He leaned down, tasting her breasts, circling the wet flesh, licking the drops of rain from her body, while more water fell from the heavens. The bricks behind ground into her back, not enough to be painful, but sufficient to make her aware that they shouldn't be here, that they were in the open where man and beast could see them. This was so wrong and that it seemed so right. The world was theirs, shrouding them while they fucked.

She gripped his shoulders and helped his rhythm, wanting another climax. His body wasn't slowing, caught in his own animalistic impulses. She wouldn't tell him to stop. If he wanted to make her come until she couldn't walk, she'd let him. Veris be damned; let him watch. This was her hero and tonight her body belonged to him. She wanted more.

For a moment his hips slowed and she saw the gleam of his teeth. There was no time to protest before he sunk those shining fangs into her neck, biting deep enough to hurt, but even the pain brought pleasure racing from her throbbing pulse to her come soaked mound. Her pussy squeezed against his cock as he sucked her throat, then he bit again, this time into her shoulder and she screamed, rocking against his hips. Still she wanted him deeper, harder, more demanding.

His body moved in her, hard, fast, and she didn't think she could take much more, but oh, she wanted to. Another orgasm came and this one was hard enough to hurt but the release was gratifying. He continued relentlessly until finally he filled her with seed again.

Cold rain ran over her naked body, leaving her vulnerable to Gershon's need. It was arousing to be controlled by him. He was still clothed except for his cock and balls. Even that was arousing, knowing that he wanted her exposed like that.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, leaning against the brick building with their bodies joined.

Carefully, he lowered her to the ground, staying inside her until the last minute. Her clothes were ruined. The jeans were the only whole article of clothing and they were too wet to put on. Itana fished her shirt out of the puddle and slid it on. It was wet, torn, and very cold against her breasts, but it was long enough to get her back to the motel room without getting them arrested. Gershon slid his coat around her, then gathered up the rest of her clothes. He handed them to her and carried her back down the alley to the parking lot.

The rain kept coming down. In some ways, it was a blessing because it kept people inside, waiting for a break in the storm. It wasn't possible to remain modest as she swung her leg over the bike and slid her naked mound on the cold wet leather seat behind Gershon. As he started the bike, the gentle vibrations running between her naked thighs managed to arouse her. She pulled her shirt as low as she could and was grateful that his jacket covered her better.

They rode back to the motel. Gershon was quick, running a red light to get her to safety. She knew that he was worrying about Veris. Even as they drove away, Veris would sense her, track her through her scent to that alley. In some ways, it was funny. Veris would go on two wild goose chases, not finding anything but her perfume in the air. After so many long years of nothing, it was bound to frustrate the hell out of him.

Gershon turned off the motor and waited for her to dismount first. He followed her to the door, opening it for them as they stepped inside to cool darkness. Itana ran to the air conditioner/heating unit and turned it to high heat.

"Should we shower? Get rid of the scent?" He asked as if he were asking her nothing more than what she wanted to drink, instead of a little detail that could get him killed and her made into a prisoner.

"That would be best."

They stepped into the water together, lathering each other up. It was a terrible tease but she wanted to be near him.

"Do you hate me?" She rinsed her body, turning away from him so she couldn't see his expression. She feared a lie almost as much as she worried over the truth.

"No." He laughed sharply, causing her to turn. "I was worried that you'd be frightened of me, well, until we ... you know. I lost my temper back there."

"You were amazing." She kissed him softly. "Absolutely amazing."

Desire rose in her again. She couldn't risk having an orgasm, no matter how badly she longed to have him inside her. He must've shared a similar thought because his cock grew rigid, lengthening to its magnificent size. She couldn't fuck him, but perhaps she could find another way to enjoy him. Itana went to her knees.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"Pleasuring you."

She took him into her mouth, bringing him deep, wanting to taste him again. Water beat against her back, while he leaned against the shower stall. At least this water was hot, taking away the chill her earlier games had brought.

She gripped his balls, massaging them as she drew him into her mouth, licking the shaft. Her lips gripped him, sucking the head, then bringing him deeper again. He groaned, and she loved the way he responded to her. His sexual appetites were amazing. Twice he'd come and now his cock throbbed against her tongue, wanting release again. She sucked harder and moved her hand along his shaft. As his excitement grew, so did

hers. She wanted his climax, his seed spilling from him. Relieving him was almost as good as climaxing herself. If only she could fuck him all night, experience all her lover's talents.

Gershon's muscles tightened and she knew he couldn't hold out much longer. She tickled the underside of his sack, traced his flesh, then used both hands on his penis. It was long, wide, and ready.

"Wait." He pulled his cock from her mouth.

Itana almost questioned him when he gripped his cock, rubbing it. With a growl, his load released over her breasts. There was an erotic quality to seeing his seed spread on her flesh. She rubbed it over her as the water washed her clean.

"Yes!" She rubbed her breasts more, wishing she could have him back inside her.

"You are too much temptation."

"We'd better get dried off before we permanently prune."

He cut off the shower and led her to the bed. Her early purchases were on it, including a backpack. Gershon's motorcycle had storage bags on either side of the rear, but she wanted to keep her things separate in case she had to leave him suddenly. It wasn't the most honorable plan, but if Gershon were in danger, she would lead Veris away from him.

One of Gershon's new t-shirts was on the bed. She slid it on then packed her backpack with the few changes of clothes she'd allotted herself. There were two spare pairs of jeans, underwear, and several shirts. Her latest prized possession was a new leather jacket, to make those motorcycle rides more comfortable.

"Why are you putting on a shirt?"

Gershon lay on the bed, naked and unashamed. His long black hair was arranged over the pillow, leaving wet lines. Such a pretty vampire. It was a shame she weren't like him. He seemed above hardship, beyond the basic pains and struggles that plagued her life. Every movement he made was with grace and power, while she fought to keep thin and unattached. It would be perfect if they were the same. Touching, making love whenever they wanted. Part of her wondered what it would be like to taste blood, the living essence of a being passing through her hungry mouth.

"Itana?"

"What?" She licked her lips. "I'm sorry; I was lost in thought."

He shook his head and smiled. "What's with the clothes?"

"I'm feeling a little paranoid. We'll be leaving in a few hours anyway, right?"

"You are wise, love." He reached for his clothes, sliding his boxers over the muscled thighs she'd touched a few moments ago. It was a shame to see him dress, putting on fresh jeans.

"I think I liked you better naked."

"Once we get our problem fixed, I'm not going to let you wear clothes for a month. Well, you looked pretty good in a wet t-shirt. I'll let you have that."

"Pervert."

She laughed and wondered if their problem could be fixed. It seemed Veris was bigger than a simple problem. Problems were bad traffic or a broken appliance. Problems couldn't steal you away, or make a person deny their true selves just to live.

Itana looked down at her arm. She wanted to know her other half, to accept the side she'd feared for so long. Perhaps she would turn into a ghost like Alard, or a henchman

like those hideous boar-headed freaks. Her skin turned to gooseflesh.

"I hope your friend can make our problems go away."

They gathered the last of their things. She watched Gershon from the window as he loaded the bike with their few possessions. The rain outside had slowed to nothing more than a light drizzle, but he'd insisted she stay inside. He fastened the saddlebags then came back to the hotel room.

"Itana, I've got a strange feeling. I don't want to wait any longer to leave." Gershon glanced outside nervously.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. It's like static in the air out there."

She went to the door and opened it. Something didn't feel right. The rain had completely stopped, but there was an eerie feeling, like the calm before the real storm would begin.

"Let's go."

The door fell shut behind her as she turned to find Gershon, fangs exposed, growling at a henchman standing by the window. A shadow in the corner opened like a door, light coming from within. The sound of footsteps followed as if the darkness were nothing but a corridor for them to travel through.

"Don't bother with him. We have to go." She looked at the opening. "Please, Gershon. He's coming." Panic flooded her senses and the last of her warning was lost in a silent prayer.

There were moments in Itana's life that seemed to stand still, engraving each detail into her brain. The first was meeting Veris, then the silver being thrust into her flesh, burning as her mother settled it near the vein. There were a few others, but she had a feeling this one would give her nightmares for the rest of her life.

A long arm came from the darkness, grabbing Gershon by the shoulder. The hand looked human, but at the end of its fingers were claws a thousand times worse than Gershon's. White spikes ended its fingers, and the creature she knew had to be Veris sunk those spikes into Gershon's flesh.

He screamed and the sound was too horrible. Itana didn't know what to do. The creature was coming out of the wall, while drawing Gershon closer to that shadowy corridor that had been part of their hotel room moments earlier.

"No!" she screamed.

Itana ran toward the long arm that had to stretch for five feet. She tried pulling Gershon free but it only caused him more pain. Finally she took a chair from the small table, and raising it over her head, smashed it into Veris's arm.

She'd expected something to happen—Veris to let go or at least howl in pain. Instead, laughter filled the darkness next to her. It was the horrible sound of defeat, echoing against Gershon's cries of pain.

Seeing Gershon draw closer into the darkness filled her with dread. She hadn't known him long, a year as a friend and a couple of days as a lover. There was no questioning the emotion bubbling through her and she'd die if he were harmed by Veris.

"Leave him alone. It's me you're after."

She started hitting the long white arm, as a second came from the darkness, followed by a third. They grabbed her arms, cool slick flesh touching hers, and they started pulling her into the darkness. She kicked, her body pushing, but there was nothing she could do.

Soon she'd be in Veris's power. Her sketchy memories gave him five or six arms. It had also seemed like he'd had a tail and the most terrifying face she'd ever seen. The thought of him made her push harder, crying as she struggled against the beast.

"I don't want you, Veris. Please leave me alone."

Itana looked down at her wrist. The silver ached. She could pull it out, face Veris in true form. Unfortunately both her hands were now in his grip. Veris jerked again and she slid another foot into the dark corridor. Soon it would swallow her.

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The pain in Gershon's arm locked him in agony. The spikes held him immobile, then he saw Itana being pulled further into the dark tunnel. No amount of concentration would break the hold on his shoulder. Even while Itana inched closer to her doom, he couldn't pull the spikes from his body. It seemed the creature had speared him to the bone.

Focusing on Itana gave him the strength he needed. Gershon reached up with his free hand, his own claws extended. The spikes were too deep to pull out, so he clawed at the hand in him. Another swipe, and the tissue tore but still wouldn't release its hold. Gershon tried again, this time aiming for the connection point between the spikes and the fingers they came from. There the bone wasn't as dense and he severed the spikes from the creature.

Itana's legs were near the darkness that had taken on a more solid appearance. There would be no way to get her back after she disappeared into that black void. Gershon looked at the declawed hand, still reaching for him and dashed around it as Itana hit the floor. Three hands pulled at her, two at her arms and one at her legs. Another came out of the awful corridor and grabbed her shirt.

*What the hell is that thing?*

She couldn't hold her position much longer. Every moment, Veris pulled her deeper, inching her forward despite her struggles. She dug her fingers into the carpet and kicked her legs, but Veris was overpowering her. Gershon reached for Itana, lunging onto the floor while Veris pulled her closer. The creature kept her out of reach. Again, Gershon stretched to her and the henchman attacked, landing on Gershon's back. There wasn't time to battle him. He touched Itana's hand as her head disappeared into the dark tunnel. Her arm slipped into darkness as Gershon got a firm hold on her hand. With the creature on his back, he pulled Itana, gaining only a few inches as the henchman drove his claws into Gershon.

He didn't want to be pulled into the darkness with her. There was something horrible on the other side and whether it was Veris or another nasty monster, Gershon didn't care. He couldn't let go though, even if he meant being pulled into hell with her.

With one hand on Itana, Gershon used the other to roll the henchman off his back, then toss him into the closing blackness. The henchman must've hit the creature on the other side because it let go briefly and Gershon pulled. Like some dark birth, Itana delivered into the light. She rolled onto the cheap hotel carpet.

There wasn't time to celebrate. Gershon grabbed Itana, half carrying her out the door. From the parking lot, he saw the darkness opening again. Some other abomination was about to be delivered into their world and he didn't want to hang around to meet it.

Itana was stunned, but got on the back of the motorcycle with little prompting. The terror clung in her eyes and he doubted he'd ever be able to erase the mark Veris had left in her mind.



“Hold on tight, baby.”

She wrapped her arms around him and the two sped off into the night. Behind them he heard something cursing loudly and a roar worse than anything he'd ever heard. He swerved but held it in the road.

They continued to ride, only pulling over after many miles had passed. There, they slid on their helmets and jackets. Itana's eyes looked glassy, ready to burst with tears but she didn't seem to have any left. Their next stop would be New York. He didn't care how rough the ride, he couldn't stop until he reached his friend Conrad and whatever answers he could provide.

*My sweet. I will save you from him. I don't know how, but I will.*

## Chapter Five

The morning was rough. The brilliant sunlight caused Gershon one hell of a headache. They'd been on the road for almost eleven hours when Gershon saw the gates to his old friend's home.

Conrad lived in a rural section before the city sprawl of New York City. The town was called Irue. It was nothing more than a dot on the map where a man like Conrad could go unnoticed. For vampires, that was an important feature of any town. Pick one too small and the neighbors picked up on things, not to mention feeding was harder. The bigger cities were better but Conrad never liked city life.

"Conrad, wake your sorry ass up." Gershon yelled into the speaker box at the gate. It was too early for vampires to be out and about. Most sensible ones slept until four or five in the afternoon. "Conrad!"

There was no answer. Gershon had called ahead of time, suspecting such a problem would occur and Conrad had given him the code to the gate. It was only polite to try to ring before entering. When Gershon was certain that the man wouldn't answer, he punched in the eight digit code and the gates swung opened. The code was long, and overkill in Gershon's opinion, but Conrad was a paranoid man, convinced that some young punk with a Buffy complex would figure out his code and come inside to harm him.

Gershon got back on the motorcycle and rode up the long winding driveway to the stone house. It was a magnificent structure with wide steps going up to a large door, rounded at the top and looking terribly medieval. To be on the safe side, Gershon took the motorcycle around back, parking more in the bushes than in the driveway. Conrad wouldn't like it, but he'd gotten over worse things.

Itana looked tired. He helped her off the bike then led her around to the front steps. Conrad had left a key for them. He'd chosen a spot only a vampire could get to, on the large wide beams making the roof of the porch. The jump was only twelve feet. Gershon went up, clinging to the beams until he found the small silver key.

They went in, feeling the warm air. Conrad rarely ran the furnace, but must've changed his habits for Itana. He'd also set them up a guest room on the second floor. Gershon led her up the curved wooden steps to a lavish room on the right overlooking the gardens.

Another vampire fallacy was that roses and such died at their presence. How in the world those rumors got started Gershon never knew. He supposed vampires had made them up to protect them against humans.

Itana slid off her clothes and he tucked her into bed. She needed some rest. So did he, but sleep wasn't what he had in mind. He sat on the bed next to her, touching her hand reassuringly. After Itana faded into a fitful sleep, Gershon shut her door and went back downstairs.

Conrad was one of the few vampires that kept virgin soil in his basement. At least one rumor was true. Vampires did gain strength through the dirt of their homeland, more importantly, uncontaminated virgin soil. It didn't repair and restore them the way blood did and wouldn't touch hunger, but it helped charge them. He imagined humans got the same results from mud baths in spas, just not to the degree vampires renewed themselves.

Gershon made his way back downstairs and the hallway. There was a small door in the wall. He opened it only to find dark air and no stairs. Conrad was so strange. Gershon jumped the distance, landing in what appeared to be an unfinished basement. The walls and floor consisted of fresh dirt. Gershon saw through the darkness to a coffin by the wall. The shiny black lacquer looked new. Conrad used to have a pine box, nothing so modern.

"Please tell me you're not still sleeping in a coffin." Gershon opened the lid and there lay Conrad. "How old school can you get?"

A century ago, it made sense to sleep in a coffin in a cemetery. The rent was free, there was plenty of dirt, and the neighbors were quiet. Over the years it proved more of a pain. Cemeteries were guarded and many times vandals roamed the grounds. Vampires with any sense bought a house.

Gershon took off his shirt and lay in the dirt. It felt good to have it against his skin, purifying his body. In the cool darkness he relaxed, dozing lightly. The events of the last twenty-four hours made true sleep impossible. He'd fall into the calming realms of dreams and that thing would crawl out of the darkness, horrible white arms with spikes for fingernails.

He jerked into consciousness finding Conrad standing over him. The old Russian grinned as he slipped a black silk shirt onto his too thin body. Conrad's hair was black with touches of gray that didn't fit the very young face.

"You were screaming." Conrad looked down at him. "Are you okay?"

"Screaming?" He hadn't realized. Sleep must've crept into him after all. "Sorry about that. It's been a rough trip." He rubbed his eyes that felt too heavy to stay open.

Another rumor was that vampires slept like the dead. They were heavy sleepers. The dreams must've been terrible if Conrad was able to wake him. Normally, short of an earthquake, little could rouse a sleeping vampire.

Conrad reached down, helping Gershon to his feet. Gershon slid on his shirt, realizing that the material smelled too much like exhaust. It would have to do. He glanced at his watch. It was late afternoon.

"Thank you for allowing us to come here."

The two men went to where stairs should be and easily ascended to the first floor. From there Gershon followed Conrad down the hall to the library. Thousands of books sat on shelves, some behind glass doors, protecting valuable old pages from the abuses of the air. Most of the volumes were on open shelves, going from floor to ceiling on three sides. No second floor existed on this side of the house. The library had been altered to take up both floors. Ladders were also left out. Conrad didn't need to them to access his books and didn't think others needed to see his collection.

"Drink?"

"Love one."

Conrad opened a small mini refrigerator beneath a bar by the door. He pulled out blood and whiskey. It had been a long time since Gershon had a good drink. Today he needed one.

"What do you have there?" Gershon asked as Conrad opened the bottle, capped much like a wine bottle but with wax covering the cork instead of some fancy foil.

"A-positive with just the right amount of adrenalin. Great stuff."

All vampires preferred warm blood fresh from a donor's throat but, as for alcoholic

drinks, nothing was better than whiskey mixed with it. It was also one of the few drinks that could make him drunk.

"I did some research after your call." Conrad handed him a drink. "Your lady friend is a rare breed indeed."

"Do you know what she is?"

Conrad sat in a leather chair next to Gershon. Both seats faced a large window with a spectacular view of green hills. The windows had also been modified to go from floor to ceiling. The books around it crowded every available inch, but the view made it worth the loss of space.

"I'll have to see her to be certain. Tell me, does she appear human?"

The question would be odd in any other circumstances, but Conrad spoke as if it were every day. It made Gershon more content with his company, and helped him realize he'd made the right choice in bringing Itana here.

"She does, but I get the distinct impression that she wouldn't without that silver in her arm."

"Be careful feeding on her. That silver could hurt you."

Gershon swirled the drink, watching the burgundy line reach the edge of the glass. It felt good to have a drink. There was only one bar in Asheville where a vampire could get blood and it was crawling with Goth kids who made him nervous. One witness to a feeding and every teenager in the state would hear about it.

"Her blood doesn't taste good but nothing's happened. It tastes spoiled, dead."

He had experienced a few ill effects from drinking Itana's blood. Feeding was so instinctual that he couldn't help but sink his teeth into her flesh. Sex went with feeding, with drawing in his lover's life force and consuming it like the desire that brought on the act. Sex wasn't required with drawing a donor's blood. He'd fed on men and women without ever becoming intimate. It spiced the orgasm, though, and made the bond much tighter.

"Have you drunk much of her blood?"

"Some."

"Take in lots of water and try to wash the toxin from your body." Conrad finished his drink and went for a second. "That lady could turn you mortal or kill you. It would take a lot of blood. Not anything you could drink in a month's time. Over a year, you wouldn't make it."

He didn't want to think about a month from now, or a year. Answers had to exist somewhere in the mass of pages surrounding him, gathering dust. There were even some scrolls. The knowledge of the world was held in one old vampire's home, and it had to contain the answers to the violent riddle of Veris.

"Can I turn her?"

"Maybe. If her other half is a night flitter, she could be turned. A shadow demon and our blood would kill her."

"Kill?"

Conrad sat back in his chair. "Vampire blood is the most contagious substance in existence. Nothing can stop it from changing the body's basic function. All but a few will lose their characteristics for ours. The others are destroyed by us."

Gershon thought about Alard. He was born without a body. That sounded very demon-like. He didn't want to think about the outcome if she couldn't be turned. He'd

waited too long to find her.

“What are my options?”

“I would feed her blood. If she turns ... great. Death wouldn’t be so bad either. In a hundred years she’ll return to you.”

The gamble was too big. He could be alone for two or three hundred years before finding her again. He’d waited too long as it was. Even a few moments from her felt like an eternity.

“I’ve never even heard of night flitters or shadow demons. I have met her brother. From what I could see, he looked human.”

“From what you could see?” Conrad rubbed his chin in that odd way that meant he was thinking too hard.

“He was born without a body.”

Conrad stood, looking inspired, then crept up the wall, scanning book spines until he found the title he’d been looking for. He held a thick black book in his hand as he eased back down and into the seat he’d just occupied.

“Do you have any idea what her father was?”

“None and she doesn’t know either. All she remembers is this horrible monster standing in the shadows demanding that she marry him. The creature’s name is Veris. He had several arms. His claws are spikes and his flesh was very white. I never saw his face.”

“The name won’t help me. Only hell’s demons gain legendary status through their names. The rest are simply some species or another.”

“May I?” Gershon raised his empty glass.

“Help yourself.”

Gershon went to the bar, mixing whiskey and blood half and half. He sipped it and closed his eyes. *Why couldn’t his bride be human or vampire or something he could deal with?*

“Has she displayed any power?” Before Gershon could answer his question Conrad cut him off. “No. No she wouldn’t have any skills with that silver in her arm. A brother without a body is certainly interesting.” He held his glass to Gershon. “While you’re up, could you fix me another?”

He was happy to help the old man. Conrad was doing him a favor and taking on a huge risk. Not only was Veris a threat, but the council wouldn’t be pleased by an outsider knowing so much about their community. They could put Itana, Gershon, and Conrad to death.

“I appreciate your help. We won’t stay long. I just need a handle on what I’m dealing with.”

“Have you sent a message to the council about this?”

Gershon couldn’t answer, only shook his head no. There was no point in lying to his friend. That wasn’t respectful and Conrad deserved that and much more. Gershon was loyal to him and held him in the highest regard.

“They know about you and the girl.”

Gershon nearly spat his drink out. “How?”

“The rumors have you in a fight with a rather unusual boar man outside of a restaurant. One of the customers followed you and saw you rip the creature in pieces.”

“I will get Itana and we will leave immediately.”

Conrad walked over and put his hand on Gershon's shoulder. "There's no point in that. Let's find some answers before you start roaming the countryside. You should be safe here. I am an old man and usually get overlooked by the council."

Gershon always thought of Conrad as an old man. It was strange hearing the words come from such a young looking mouth. He was used to humans, and their feeble elderly. At least a vampire's life was kinder. Their bodies didn't betray them with aches, pains, and eventually, total failure.

"Only if you're sure. I would never intentionally cause you trouble."

Conrad laughed. It had been a long time since he'd heard him laugh. "I grow bored anyway. This at least gives me something to do."

That was the biggest part of being a vampire, monotony. Money was easy to get. If one needed a job, mesmerize the boss into giving them one. The same went for anything they wanted. Old vampires only knew desire for two things, blood and a mate. Beyond that, there was nothing special. They'd seen it all and done it all.

"Forgive me for asking, but I must. How is Elaine?"

"Still too young for me to take. It will be another seven years before I can make her my bride." He drank down his third drink of the night. "I understand if you don't want to risk finding Itana later. It's always best to take your mate the moment you see her."

Conrad's eyes gave away the loneliness that ate at him. He'd had Elaine once, only then she'd been called Rebecca. She was killed, murdered for being a healer, only her murderers had called her a witch. Conrad buried her body in a remote forest then waited for her soul to return.

Vampires knew the moment their mate hit puberty. No vampire would take a woman before her twentieth year and it was preferred to wait until the twenty-fifth or later because a certain maturity should've been reached. For whatever reason, still birth or an unwilling soul, Rebecca hadn't reappeared until two years ago. Conrad watched her, but this year was her fifteenth. She was far too young, so Conrad drank, read, and watched his investments for the day he'd support his bride.

It really wasn't fair. Humans never knew the moment their mate existed. They simply loved and fucked until they ended up with the right person. Mistakes could be made, but they didn't wait centuries pining for an unreachable loved one.

"Gershon, I could search these books for hours and not come up with the correct answer. I think we need to either remove the silver from Itana's arm or find this Veris. If I see his form, perhaps some assumptions can be made about Itana and at the least we could destroy him."

"No." Itana appeared at the door. She looked freshly bathed. "No one battles Veris. He's a monster. Looking at him won't give you any clues as to what I am." Her head lowered. "Taking the silver out might also kill me. It was placed carefully to prevent its removal."

"Welcome, Miss Itana." Conrad stood and took her hand, kissing the knuckles. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Thank you, Conrad."

"Would you care for a drink?"

Conrad went to the bar. Gershon was about to remind him that Itana had no taste for blood, but it was unnecessary. He pulled out a bottle of fine wine, popped the cork and filled a glass halfway. In his usual flirty way, Conrad grazed her hand as he gave her the

glass. Gershon had to laugh. It didn't matter the circumstances, Conrad knew how to be a gracious host.

"Thank you." Itana downed the glass in a most unlady like fashion. She made the act graceful, even with her hands shaking.

"Itana, I think we need to see your true form. Tonight, I'd like to remove the silver from your arm."

"No." Itana visibly jumped backwards as if the words stung her. "Veris will find me if I remove it."

Her fear was obvious, forcing Gershon to go her. He wrapped his arms around Itana but she wouldn't relax or even lean against him. Everything about her was rigid, even her breathing came in short bursts.

"Sweetheart," Gershon whispered, "Veris will find us anyway. I don't know about you, but I have no intentions of being celibate for the rest of my life."

She looked at him, eyes glassy with the tears he'd seen her trying to hold back since their first night together. He wished he could make her smile again. Take away some of the pain eating away at her heart.

"In five years, I'll be free."

There was no point in arguing with her. They both knew that they couldn't keep Veris at bay for five years. Even the strongest man would fold under those conditions and Veris no longer had the lone scent of Itana, Gershon was also being tracked. It was the only explanation for the scene in the hotel room.

"I'm afraid." Itana pulled free and sat in the chair Gershon had occupied. "My mother put the silver in me for several reasons, only one was Veris."

A wind blew into the room and Gershon knew her brother, Alard, had paid them another visit. Whether he always kept such close tabs on his sister was uncertain, but he stayed close now.

"Itana put on quite a show as a child." Alard's voice hung above them and Gershon assumed the specter stayed in the air, surveying the place.

"I do not believe I invited any ghosts into my home."

Conrad stood, eyes dark slits against his pale face. It wasn't good to anger Conrad and worse to frighten him. From his friend's expression, Alard had scared the crap out of him.

"Forgive me, but I am Itana's brother and tend to play at her shadow. If I offend, I will take my leave."

"You are the boy born without a body?"

A shimmer appeared on the air, lowering in front of Conrad. As it reached the level of the floor, Alard formed a face and transparent outline of a body. His hand reached out, offering to shake Conrad's. The old vampire stared then reached to the ghostly hand passing right through it. Alard laughed wildly.

"I love that joke."

The jovial theme wasn't shared. Gershon was afraid of laughing for risk of offending Conrad, although it reminded him of a silly human prank where one would pull away their hand before a high five.

It took Conrad a moment before a smile appeared on his face. He too laughed, but not with the exuberance of Alard. At least the awkwardness of the moment faded and pleasant conversation could return.

“Then I welcome you, Alard. Favor us a story about Itana’s youth.”

“That I will.”

“Alard,” the warning sound in Itana was clear, but Alard gave her no notice.

Alard rose again in the middle of the room, then went to the windows as if they were a large crowd instead of three people. Gershon suspected that he was really trying to get out of Itana’s way. He might not have a body, but he bet Itana could still give him hell.

“Everything was fine when Itana was a baby, although my memories are also sketchy. My first solid recollection of my sister came from her third birthday. She pitched a fit and the house shook. Mother said that was odd.”

Gershon had to interrupt. Causing a house to shake was impressive for any beast, much less a distraught toddler. Surely she hadn’t looked human then. Asking seemed rude, but under the circumstance politeness was a waste of time.

“What did she look like then?”

Alard pursed his ghostly lips, then looked down at his sister. She held curiosity in her eyes too. He supposed her memories weren’t as clear as her brothers.

“She was a black fairy. Oh, not black in the African American terms, but black as in the darkness. Whatever our mother mated with, it was a creature of night, of darkness, of velvet midnight.” He smiled and the love between the siblings showed.

“Back to the point, I remember her hurting Mom a few times with her claws. Then there was the fire and the black crystals. It seemed my sister enjoyed decorating. She made a puppet show of fire. These odd little creatures made of flame that floated in the air and entertained me. When she was angry, black crystals fell from the air. It was like any water vapor changed to a solid black rain. She could also make this black bubble gum come after me when I’d angered her. It was one of her nicer tricks. Many times she’d tried to stick me to a wall.” Alard floated closer, a mischievous grin across his face. “I remember Itana making Ivy grow in the walls and birds break their necks flying into the glass of our home.”

“Oh!” Itana crossed her arms over her chest. “I can’t be blamed for clean windows.”

“Clean windows? When you sang, those damn birds would crash into the window until you stopped. Some times there were fifty and many times they cracked the glass.” He rolled his eyes, looking up toward the ceiling. “I guess that’s a testament to bad singing if birds commit suicide to escape it.”

Conrad looked at Itana, studying her too closely. Itana shifted but Conrad wouldn’t let up, going so far as to lift her hair to look at the side of her face. She was clearly annoyed but indulged their host.

“I’ve never heard of a night fairy.”

“I don’t know the correct name for it. That’s one I made up. I don’t remember much about what she looked like. I think she had wings but never flew and her hair wasn’t blond but a purple black. With the silver in, she looks like Mom.”

“I can see why her beauty would lure a night creature.” Conrad looked around his room, glancing up at his books when the telephone rang. The digital noise was out of place in the room of books. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Conrad went to the bar and lifted a cordless phone from the base. The expression his friend wore worried Gershon. Apparently Conrad recognized the number and wasn’t pleased to see it.

“One moment.” Conrad flashed a look at Gershon, implying a warning Gershon



already felt.

“Itana, go upstairs and get your things.”

“What’s wrong?”

There was no easy way to explain that however benign vampires truly were, the knowledge of their existence was lethal. From Conrad’s expression that call had to be from the council or some member of it.

“We might have to go.”

“Why?” Her big beautiful eyes looked up as she spoke. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Ladies, no matter how remarkable, aren’t supposed to know about vampires. Two thousand years ago a council was formed to govern vampire matters. They enforce their own laws, which include discretion. Anyone who knows about vampires has to be dealt with by turning, memory erasure, or death.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Itana threw her hands into the air. “I can’t take any more people after me. You stay here. I’m going to leave. Veris won’t find me. I’ve hid from him for this long.”

The shimmer lowered and Alard touched Itana’s hair, managing to move a few strands. “You’re condemning him too, Itana. It’s too late for running. Veris is after him too, now.”

Gershon had never seen Itana grow angry. In the last year, he’d seen every emotion out of her except pure rage. She showed it now, screaming low. Frantically, she searched the room and found a letter opener. She picked it up, holding the tip near her white delicate skin.

“I wouldn’t do that, yet, Itana.” Conrad stood at the door, phone held in his hand. “Veris might track your blood and I don’t want my lovely books destroyed.”

Itana set down the blade.

“I told her to gather her things. We won’t trouble you again.”

“I’m afraid that it’s too late for that. Someone spotted you at a gas station at sunup. It was on the side road, heading here.” Conrad put the phone down. “I admitted that you were here.”

So their fate was sealed. If they left, the council would take their vengeance on Conrad. Trusting old insane men with his love’s life wasn’t easy. Maybe they would try to understand, although the council wasn’t known for being understanding.

“I told them that we had a special circumstance and you brought the girl here to decide her fate. You’ve broken no laws, Gershon. The risk is Itana’s to bear.”

Gershon leapt at his friend, flying forward and stopping inches from his face. It was wrong, disrespectful, but he’d come here for sanctuary in a world that wanted to rip Itana from him.

“How could you? She’s a person. I’m not willing to wait for her to be reborn.”

“I did what was necessary. Even if she dies, she’ll come back. None of us know if vampires are allotted the same second chance. In all my years, I’ve never seen one of our kind reborn. In that, we are damned.”

“We don’t know if she can come back. She’s not human.”

This gave Conrad cause to think. It was apparently an angle he hadn’t considered. Vampires always felt shorted by the human race because of their ability to return to this life. Not knowing what she was, there were no guarantees for her.

“Excuse me, I am still in the room.” Itana stepped next to them, pushing Gershon away from Conrad. “You said my choices were to be turned, memory erasure, or death.”

“It’s too late to erase your memory.” Conrad touched her shoulder and Gershon saw regret in his old eyes. “That can only be done when a mortal has had a brief encounter, either seeing a vampire or being food for one. It’s not possible to take so many days of thoughts from you.”

“Death’s out.” She looked at Conrad as if he’d been considering it. “What is turned?”

Gershon couldn’t look at her. Many women had problems with vampire weddings. Few knew what was happening until they sprouted fangs of their own. Many years were lost to pissed off women, taking their anger out on their husbands.

“Usually when a vampire mates with his bride, he feeds her his blood. This starts a change in the woman and binds her to him for eternity.”

“Eternity? Sweetie, I’m not immortal. In ten years, you won’t want to be with…” Her words died as she realized. “You mean turn me into a vampire.” It wasn’t a question but Gershon treated it like one.

“Yes. It’s what has to happen. I put it off because of our differences.”

“Depending on what your other half is, the change could kill you.” Conrad finished the thought and Gershon was grateful.

“I’m sorry, old friend.”

“All’s forgiven. Besides, I have a plan.”

It had been a long time since Conrad had been on an adventure. From the look in his eyes, he had one hell of a plan in store for them. At least some things didn’t change. Conrad would be his friend until the end.

“The council will be here tomorrow night. That doesn’t give us much time.” Conrad looked around the room. “Alard, are you still here?”

“Yes.” He became very visible, a ghost with eyes, nose and mouth.

“I will need your help too.” He grabbed Gershon by his shoulders and looked as if ready to plant a big kiss on each cheek. It wouldn’t be the first time and Gershon never liked it. “We’re going to make a call to Veris.”

“A call?” Itana was the first to ask.

“Yes. Let’s handle Veris. We will take one problem at a time and since he will be a problem for Gershon for as long as he lives, let’s handle it first.”

“A call?” she repeated.

“I hope you don’t embarrass easily.” Conrad grinned like an evil child with a secret.

“I don’t like the sound of this.”

## Chapter Six

Itana looked out the window, watching the dilapidated town unfold before her. Conrad had the perfect place picked out or so he'd told Gershon. When they pulled in front of the three-story brick building, she knew they had found the right place to call out the monster.

There was nothing near what must've been an old factory. A parking lot stretched around the structure, which had been covered in graffiti and racist symbols. Most of the building was intact but the westside was missing part of the roof. All the doors were chained and the windows had been boarded up with no trespassing signs.

Conrad parked close to the doors. They followed as he got out and ripped off the chain like it had been made of paper instead of rusted steel. A door came loose from the hinges, tilting toward Conrad. He jerked it free and set it to the side of the entrance.

Filth greeted them, swirling in the air from what light the dirty windows would let in. Unlike her old apartment building, the floors were made of wood over metal beams. She guessed the dark brown beam running under the smashed wood was metal. There wasn't much else holding up the building. Stepping inside seemed foolish, but that's what Conrad did so she followed.

"Everything's ready," called Alard from the stairs across from them. He'd beat them there. She wasn't sure how he traveled, but he did it quickly and never had traffic problems.

"Ready for what?" Itana didn't like being kept in the dark and Conrad was avoiding her questions. She grabbed his arm, staring him in the eyes. At first she couldn't speak. His was an old soul and she sensed danger. "Please, tell me what your plan is."

"Let's go upstairs."

The stairs were concrete and fairly well intact. Conrad went up first with her following and Gershon behind. On the second floor, Conrad left the stairs through a jagged doorway with most of the frame missing. There hovered Alard. She'd never been so happy to see her brother, although he looked a little afraid.

To the side was an old office, nothing much but a door with a large window. A few sewing machines were left still attached to their tables, as if they were waiting for someone to use them again. This must've been the sewing floor. A pile of cloth remained in the corner near a sewing machine that had been tossed into the floor. The wooden floor wasn't as beaten here. There were ruts where something on wheels had made too many passes.

"You see that office right there?" Conrad pointed; she and Gershon nodded. "Gershon, take Itana in there and make her come four or five times. Whatever it takes to call this Veris. As soon as you're finished, she goes downstairs with Alard. We wait for Veris here. If he tries to take her from the first floor, Alard will let us know. You and I will take on Veris and kill him. He might be too much for us, but I doubt it. There is always a chance. If he does prove a challenge, we jump out that window." He pointed to broken glass across from the office. "The car is parked below. Alard and Itana should be waiting there when we make our escape."

"It's too dangerous." Itana felt her heart in her throat again. She looked at Gershon

and knew Veris was stronger. "Veris might hurt you."

"Then we run." Gershon smiled but Itana knew the look of arrogance when she saw it. Confidence was one thing, underestimating the enemy was another.

"Itana," spoke Conrad, "this is the only fair shot Gershon has. It's either this or the two of you try to resist temptation until we figure out what you are. Without removing the silver, I doubt I can do it. Removing the silver calls Veris, so we're back to battling him."

The smell of stale air and dust choked her. She wanted out of here. This place was ready to fall in and waiting for an excuse. Doing battle in this environment was nearly as dangerous as facing Veris. The combination could prove deadly.

She looked at Gershon and knew running wouldn't solve the problems she'd caused him. Conrad's plan was a solid one. It would be better for Gershon to face Veris with help.

"Let me stay up here and fight Veris with you."

"No." Conrad spoke a second before Gershon. "You would be a distraction. Instead of fighting Veris, he would be protecting you. That might get all of us hurt."

"Please, Itana. For once, can you drop the stubborn routine?"

*For once?* "Uhg." All she'd done was listen to Gershon. She was in love with him. Every moment she spent screamed the truth and it wasn't a choice. She craved his touch, the way he'd look at her.

"Itana?" Gershon gently touched her arm.

"I'll do what you ask, but please don't get hurt. Promise me that you won't do anything stupid. If this goes bad, get out and run. Promise me."

"I promise that I won't let him take you."

Gershon couldn't keep his promise. There was no way to guarantee anything but at least it implied he'd live through this. That would be enough to help her through the next few hours.

"Do you have any weapons?"

Conrad held up a finger then went to the broken window and jumped. The sight made Itana gasp. She couldn't help it. She'd never seen someone jump from a second story window or saw one return the same way with a bundle wrapped in cloth.

"I have been preparing for your arrival."

He unrolled the cloth. First two pistols came out. Conrad handed one to Gershon and one to her. Next was a shotgun. He kept that one for himself, setting it behind him. The next layer had knives, swords, and even pepper spray.

"I'll need a weapon too." Alard became very visible, kneeling next to Conrad.

"Can you hold one?"

"I can carry up to a few pounds."

Itana watched him concentrate. His hand never became truly whole, but he picked up a knife and held it to the light. Gershon and Conrad stared, amazed by her ghost brother's accomplishments. They should've seen him at McDonalds, floating a cheeseburger through the air just to mess with the employees.

"This way I can help defend Itana at the car."

"Excellent. Gershon, why don't you two go to the office. I'll wait up here and Alard, please wait downstairs. Let's get this over with."

Itana walked towards the office. She wasn't feeling amorous and the idea of Gershon

making her come to summon an enemy didn't help things. Run, that's all she wanted to do. As she passed the window, she considered it, just running and jumping like Conrad had and seeing what happened. She wasn't a vampire, but maybe the fall wouldn't kill her.

"It will be okay. You'll see."

They stepped into the remains of an office. The desk was intact, but dusty. A few files were scattered across the floor, their contents unworthy of packing away. No chair sat behind the desk. Their relations would have to be done standing because she was not lying on the floor.

Gershon dragged a section of cloth inside the office and used it to cover the window. She was grateful for the privacy but still not in the mood. He must've sensed it, rubbing her shoulders instead of pulling away her clothing.

"We have to do this you know."

She nodded.

"Try to relax and I'll do the rest."

There was no point in responding. He turned her face to his, locking eyes with her. Gershon had the most interesting eyes, deep and penetrating, dark yet brilliant. For a moment she was lost in his gaze.

"Relax. You want me. Let yourself feel it."

The sound of his voice filled her head and she began nodding. His words ran in circles while his eyes saw deeper into her mind. There was nothing else to think about, nothing she could respond to.

"You want me. Here and now."

His words went through her and all the tension melted away. The room seemed to fade and all she could see was Gershon, strong and handsome. She wanted him. His hands left her shoulders, stroking down her arms and leaving heat in their wake. Her nipples tightened and she longed for him to touch her.

She wanted to go down on him again, taste his cock. When her hand reached his zipper, he stopped her and brought her hand to his lips. His soft lips kissed the palm of her hand.

"Today is about you, my love."

Gershon reached for her breast, touching her, then lightly flicking the nipple beneath the cloth. Moisture built in her mound as she watched him slide a hand beneath her shirt. He gripped her, turning her back to him and grinding his cock against her clothed ass. It was a sweet sensation and again, he was in control.

He placed both of her hands on the desk then unfastened the top of her pants. His hand slid beneath her panties, and Gershon cupped her mound while his mouth grazed the flesh below her ear, following around to the pulse point. He was going to bite her. Her excitement grew, the anticipation sweeter than she remembered.

"My tasty love."

One finger slid into her folds as the sharp points of his teeth touched her flesh. He teased her, making her wait for the moment he'd sink into her, tasting her body in a primal way she'd never understand.

Gooseflesh covered her, his warm breath wavering over her neck made the act sweetly torturous. She leaned forward, hot, cold, and excited all at the same time. Cleanly, he sunk his teeth into the vein, causing the slightest pain before pleasure rushed

through her body. Her hips came up and like a signal, she started rubbing against his hand. There was no reason to fight the pleasure, and giving into it was too easy. The build up was quick, taking her in a torrent, pleasure racing, body quivering, and she came. Itana gripped the desk as he withdrew his fangs. Her slit dripped with gratification while she relaxed against him. She could hear him lick away the excess blood, and felt his wet tongue clean the drops that made it to her throat.

“I’m not finished with you yet.”

Gershon unzipped her jeans farther, sliding a finger between the lips and stroking her clitoris. It was super sensitive, causing her to jump at the contact. He moved his finger faster against the magic spot. There was no question that she belonged to him, to his desires, even to his whims. It was freeing. She’d been in control for too long, afraid to bond with anyone, never letting her guard down for fear of rejection and danger. This man, this vampire did more than bond with her. He made her who she longed to be. She was accepted, needed, and maybe even really loved.

“Come for me.” His voice a teasing seduction, while his hand built her again. “I know you want to. Make my fingers drip.”

She leaned against him, not wanting to come again but unable to stop the build and release. He seduced her with his body and fucked her with a single finger, bringing more satisfaction than any of her other lovers. She longed for his cock to finish her but her nub throbbed and she let go, over that edge, gasping as he held her.

“Good girl.” He kissed the back of her neck until her body slowed. “One more thing.”

He tugged Itana’s pants down, then set her on the edge of the desk. In front of her, he knelt. That wicked mouth, fangs still showing, level with her pussy. Gershon readied to take her, and she held her breath. The fangs made him animalistic, powerful and she wanted to feel them again.

She watched him come forward, and he buried his mouth in her muff. His lips found her clit, suckling it and giving soft flicks with his tongue. She started to come and tried to pull away. His ravenous mouth buried deeper. She felt gentle grazes from his teeth, his tongue lapping away her juices.

“No more, Gershon, please.”

He growled, vibrating the delicate places he incited. It felt too good. She ran her fingers into his hair and pressed his face harder into her flesh. His tongue crept in her folds and when he went back to her clit, she called out in pleasure so extreme she bit her lip. The pressure increased. Both his hands reached around to her ass, bringing her body hard against his face. Fingers gripping her flesh, digging into her soft ass. She craved that raw thrill, and he knew it, not stopping until she came again.

“Gershon.”

She thought that would be enough but he didn’t quit. He hadn’t left enough marks on her body. His sharp teeth eased to her thigh, finding the vein where her leg joined. She felt her pubic hair brush against him. He massaged her flesh, kneading it before sinking his razor fangs deep into her skin.

Itana jerked, leaning back. For a moment, she thought she’d lose consciousness, but not from blood loss. The emotions tore through her violently, ripping away years of protection she’d built up. The walls she’d placed around her heart came down and she felt it instantly as he sipped the blood from her vein. Again, she came, body pulsing, body

quivering. He was her master and she his instrument. She would never be the same woman. Gershon may not have turned her, but he changed the rules guarding her life.

His mouth retreated from her vein and he went down her thigh licking away the red. It shouldn't have been sexy but it was. She was part of him. The fluid that gave her life, fed him. He was a beautiful mate.

"I love you, Gershon." Her words felt like a goodbye and their situation came crashing in on her.

"I love you too."

Itana relished hearing those words, but she might never hear them again. This had all been a game to call Veris. In her passion, she'd completely forgotten. She wasn't sure what had possessed her to enjoy Gershon; then again, vampires had a gift of being able to toy with a person's mind. To accomplish his goal, he must've done just that. It was the only explanation.

"You'd better get downstairs. It shouldn't take long now."

"I don't want to leave you."

"Then go downstairs so he won't take you from me."

He kissed her lips, brushing his against hers. She'd give anything to keep him safe. Conrad had a point though. How well could he fight if he were busy watching out for her?

She fastened her pants and opened the door to the office. Gershon kept his hand at her back, either a gentle reminder, or fear she'd disappear in front of him. Then he pulled her close, touching her body with his.

"Please be careful." He handed her the small pistol Conrad had brought for her.

"Of course, my love."

Itana waited for him to let go before continuing across the long floor to the stairs. Conrad stood, staring out the window. He'd been a perfect gentleman, allowing her modesty. Even now he didn't acknowledge her, except to offer a brief nod and a kind smile.

She'd almost reached the stairs when she felt static crawl over her skin. It was too soon for Veris. It usually took time to pinpoint her location. The feeling was inexplicable, the static, the chill.

Behind her stood Gershon and Conrad, with their backs to her, staring at the office for the black void to come. Then the walls began to morph, and the henchmen came. Eight men appeared from dark corridors that hadn't been there moments before. It was starting and not at the office.

"Gershon, look out!"

Gershon and Conrad turned toward her voice. They hadn't expected the fight to be from that direction. Their weapons were separated from them, but Gershon was already fighting, bringing one to his knees. She turned to flee down the stairs and found blackness circling her. She'd been too busy worrying over Gershon to see the dark corridor opening where the stairs had been. It was a fluke that Veris had cut off her only means of escape. He wasn't good enough to know they were on a high second floor. He'd been an efficient hunter this round. As the white arms encircled her body, she knew that help couldn't arrive in time.

Itana pulled the pistol from her waistband, but it was a futile effort. Veris had too many hands. Her only weapon was wrenched from her hand and skidded across the

wooden floor.

"I love you, Gershon!" she screamed as she lost sight of the factory.

\* \* \* \*

Gershon turned seeing the blackness behind Itana. He couldn't speak fast enough. That thing reached from the darkness and took her, folded its white nasty arms around her and carried her into oblivion.

"Itana!"

The henchmen were everywhere but there wasn't time to deal with them. Conrad must've noticed because he ran with Gershon toward the opening in the stairs. Each knocked the beasts from their path as they ran, trying to reach Itana before the corridor closed, locking her away forever. Conrad was delayed by one of the beasts, but Gershon kept going.

Ahead, the darkness shrank, growing smaller. Even with vampire speed, he feared he wouldn't make it in time. The hole grew to the size of a few feet and Gershon dove, seeing the bricks in the stairwell. For a moment he thought he'd smash into the grimy wall when cool darkness overcame him.

He closed his eyes, then reopened them, trying to focus. Ahead he saw a shape moving away from him. Itana locked in its arms. When he first caught a glimpse of Veris, he thought the creature had four arms. Now he saw six arms, two legs, and when Veris glanced back, he had three eyes.

Gershon started running, not knowing what he'd do once he reached Veris. The distance between them closed. Veris reached back with one white hand, waving it in the air and the tunnel changed. Instead of facing Veris, Gershon ran into a wall.

He fell back, the air knocked out of him. His chest and hands stung from smacking into the black surface. There was no way of knowing what it consisted of. The wall was as hard as rock, but felt slimy to the touch. Gershon touched his shirt and found a slick residue. It reminded him of those living caves. The ones where touching them could stop their growth.

Lying on the floor, he realized that it held the same consistency, not quite as slick but very similar to the wall. He jumped up, unable to clean the muck off his hands. Turning around, he couldn't find a door or anything but a dark hallway leading out the way he'd come, except now it didn't seem to go anywhere, deadending in the black capsule. He was trapped.

The dark wall in front was his only hope. He started pounding on it, ignoring the feeling of slime. He used his claws to swipe at the rock. Each swipe brought something dark, oozing from the scratch. Hearing a soft cry he stopped. No one seemed to be around. He listened carefully and could've sworn the sound came from the wall.

"Please, I have to get Itana. She's given herself to me." It was stupid to talk to a wall. This entire place was a living nightmare, something that couldn't be escaped. Vampire instincts were usually correct, and his encouraged him to speak to this inanimate object that could bleed. "A terrible man has taken her." *Was he a man? Now wasn't the time to question it.* "I need to get down this tunnel before he hurts her."

Behind him, he heard the sucking of air. He turned to see another opening and three white figures appear. These must've been the female version of whatever Veris was. When they came closer, they reminded him of albinos with pink eyes, skin never touched



by daylight. Their hair was long, white, floating more than flowing, like a cobweb caught on a breeze. Each of them had six arms, but their fingers had no spikes. Female breasts tipped in pink and shallow belly buttons were the only human features on their torsos. A thin patch of white hair covered their sex, so he couldn't be sure how human that area was. Their legs went down to feet without heels, causing them to walk on their toes. At least their mouths appeared human. That's where he focused.

"Where is Itana?"

The three women came closer. The one in the middle spoke first. Her voice a mix of hisses and growls settling slowly to a human tongue he could understand, although the accent seemed a cross between Japanese and British.

"She ... she ... she has been taken to Veris's bedchamber." The woman licked her pink lips. "We were sent to distract you until he could take her."

"Take me to Itana. Veris can't have her."

"Veris takes what he wants." The second spoke but her pink eyes didn't seem as fierce as the other two. "We are from his harem." Her words were tinged in pain. "We know that he will keep Itana."

"I love her. It isn't right to take her when she loves me."

The one in the middle came forward, opening all six arms as if offering herself to him. "We can bring you great pleasure. You should try us before deciding on Itana."

*Great, Veris was trying to trade his three spider women for Itana.*

"No thank you. I'm in love with Itana."

The other two came forward. Gershon backed up, but stopped before touching the slimy wall again. He'd never hit a woman, but had no doubt he'd attack these female creatures if provoked.

"Show me Itana."

The women growled and two jumped on him. He knocked one away but the other bit his shoulder. The thing had fangs and he felt something hot injected into him. It burned through his arm and drained his ability to fight. His limbs took on an unnatural weight, arms falling beside him unable to move. Legs, so strong a few seconds ago, sank under his weight and he hit the floor.

"Now we can enjoy him properly."

He could see them, hear them, but couldn't do more than blink. His mouth worked to some extent and he tried to talk them out of their plans, but wasn't sure how long before the ability to communicate would fail him.

"Why are you doing this?"

The first woman pulled away his shirt making coos of delight when she saw his body. The second pulled off his pants, while the third stayed away looking sad. He wished he could pull away from their strange touch. Those white hands made him think of a snake's caress while their bodies made him think of spiders.

"Please don't do this. I must be with Itana."

"Veris must mate with Itana. Only then will he find the ability to walk in daylight. She can harness the night and control it in the day. Instead of being stuck in the earth, finding dimensional paths to visit, he could roam the land undeterred, and their children would be gods."

"Then we can feed," added the other. "We want to feed in the daylight."

After speaking, the woman by his pants brought his cock into her mouth. It remained

flaccid for some time, but she was persistent. Gershon never liked spiders in any form. Part of him didn't care what creature sucked his cock. The sensation was pleasing and soon enough he felt his body rising to the occasion. His reaction made the spider-woman slow, her head not bobbing as low, only licking, then stopping all together. It seemed release was not on these creatures' minds. As soon as he was fully erect, they both sunk their teeth into Gershon's flesh.

Just as he had never seen women such as these, they'd never been around a vampire. The woman instantly began to choke on his blood. Their white faces turned red, then blue. He remembered what Conrad had said. Vampire blood was the strongest, and must be deadly to these beasts.

The women fell to the floor, convulsing and turning black before they stopped moving completely. There was only one left and she stared in disbelief as her sisters in the harem died.

"Help me," he muttered.

For a moment, he feared she'd flee and leave him to whatever else lurked in these tunnels. She took a step toward the wall then came back. Very carefully, she raised his head and looked him in the eyes.

"What creature are you?"

"Vampire from the line of Malistoan. My name is Gershon."

"Gershon, I am Raya. I will save you if your promise to take me from this place." Strange black tears ran from her eyes creating a cracked look in her white skin. "I never want to be touched by Veris again."

"Won't you die out there?"

"Not if you permit me a shadow, a closet, some place dark to rest. I won't be much trouble and can be of assistance."

He didn't want to take this thing out of these tunnels, but he had no idea where to find the exit or Itana. Gaining her help would be worth anything. If he didn't hurry, there was no telling what Veris would do to Itana.

"I promise that if I am able, I will bring you with me."

"Fair enough." She brushed the wall with her hand and it opened. "I will carry you to my chambers. There is antidote there."

She pulled his pants back on, although she didn't properly fasten them. Four arms carried him into another dark corridor. Their path twisted and turned as they traveled deeper into the dark place. A door, a real looking door made of black diamonds, opened. This place must be her room or something. A white web strung across one side like a bed. Several pottery jars sat near the wall. She sat Gershon in the web then went to the first jar, scooping something out of it. When she came closer, he saw green berries in her hand.

"You must be very remarkable to manage speech. Our venom usually eliminates everything but sexual function." She squeezed the juice from the berries into his mouth. "There is a chemical released in the blood during arousal, I think you call it a hormone. It's the hormone that sustains us."

He didn't like being so close to her, even if she was helping him. In his condition, she could do anything to him, including killing him for the deaths of the others. She didn't though; she tried to be gentle as she filled his mouth with the bitter juice.

"Give it a second. When you are capable of movement, we will find Itana."

The burning in his veins instantly changed to ice. That was the vampire blood's way. It dominated by cooling the living properties, then taking over. His body started feeling better, his chest less tight, his fingers tingling as if waking from a long sleep. It felt good to move his fingers again.

"Do you really love this woman, or do you want her for breeding?" Her pink eyes blinked at him.

"I love her. We haven't even discussed having children yet." He managed to sit up but couldn't stand yet.

"Your people give a woman the choice?"

"Of course. If she really loved Veris instead of me, then I would let her go to make her happy. I know that she loves me though. I have to save her."

He rubbed his legs hoping to hurry the process along. Control was returning, but every moment put Itana in deeper danger. There was no telling what Veris would do to her.

"Please keep your word and take me from this place."

"If there is a way, I will, but I can not leave without Itana."

Gershon stood, unsteadily at first, but his legs were strong. He bent them, then took a few steps, testing their steadiness. His body made repairs and the creature's venom faded quickly.

"Show me Itana."

She led the way, her odd feet moving her body with its too long torso and too many arms. The next hall deadended, so she touched it and the wall opened, retreating from where she'd touched, then opening outward until a doorway formed.

Raya led him down another hallway. At once she held up her hand, shushing him. A touch and she opened a space in the wall, pushing him into it as more spider creatures filled the hallway. When the noise passed, she opened the space again and they continued.

Ahead stood another diamond-crusted door. Raya went in first, motioning him back. She stepped inside, checking the room before brining in Gershon. Quietly, he followed. Long curtains of white webs hung in the room. He moved past these and found Itana.

Itana clothes were rumpled but she remained dressed. One tear went across the shoulder of her shirt, below a set of fang marks. The bite left nasty, deep indentations at the main artery in her neck, probably the site of a venom injection. Her body hung in webbing, wrists above her head in a thicker concentration of horizontal white line. Itana's legs were attached to the wall, splayed wide and held by her ankles. Her head hung down, chin resting on her chest. She didn't look up as he approached. Her chest moved in shallow breaths, as if that was all she could manage.

"We have to hurry."

Gershon extended his claws, cutting her hands free as Raya tore away the webs at her feet. She fell forward, not moving. At least he knew Veris hadn't done much damage to her. He could forgive himself for losing her once, after she was back at Conrad's home.

"How long do the effects of the venom last?"

"A day. We'll stop by my chamber and get her the remedy to hurry the healing."

As the words left her mouth, the sidewall opened and Veris appeared. His face was a strange shining cluster of white and pink. His hair was so white it was nearly translucent,

puffing around him in the still air. The need for breeding was apparent in his cock, hanging to his knees. In his hand was some sort of whip. Gershon had arrived just in time.

“What are you doing here?” his voice roared in a snarling sound.

Gershon didn't want to fight him in the guts of this strange world. He grabbed Itana and started running. Veris followed, carrying himself on two legs with his lower arms pushing his body toward the door. Raya stayed behind Gershon but had trouble keeping up. Gershon started to pass a turn when Raya grabbed him and pushed him down a hallway that hadn't been there before. They entered and the doorway vanished, this world swallowing them.

“Which way out?”

“Don't forget your promise to me.”

“I won't. Which way out?”

She hung her head, shaking a silent no. “I can take you back to where I found you.”

That wouldn't help. It seemed Raya didn't know the way out any more than he had. She was a prisoner of this living maze and one doomed to serve Veris if Gershon didn't find his way back.

“Is there a place we can hide until I figure this out?”

“Follow me.”

Gershon followed Raya down another corridor. Somewhere in the walls Veris screamed a primal sound of hate and frustration. Raya visibly shook but kept going, unwilling to give up on her only chance at freedom.

They kept going until her chamber door stood in front of them. Raya led them inside. Gershon set Itana on the web bed and checked her vital signs. She still couldn't move; her open eyes stared and he hoped she understood that they were trying to save her.

“Give me a minute.”

“A minute may be all you have.” She went to her pottery and plucked a berry.

Vampires were very gifted at mental abilities, although true telepathy had never been a gift of the blood. Conrad had the strongest powers of any he'd ever met. It occurred to him that if he concentrated, reaching out in the hopes that if Conrad also searched for him, their minds could find each other. It would only help if Conrad knew a way out of this hell. It wasn't like saying hello would do much good.

Outside, the walls rumbled and groaned. Footsteps filled everything around them and Gershon knew Veris was closing in. He probably knew their scent, more than just a sexual secretion, but their sweat in this strange place where only boar-men and spider-women lived.

*Conrad.* He kept focused on the only person that could help them. Conrad.

One thought came back. *Oh shit. I found them.*

The floor rumbled and Gershon's trance broke. The walls quivered and he feared Veris would appear from any of these smooth walls, leaping out of the dark living stone. In front of him something quivered in the wall. He waited to see the darkness open and the white hands come forth. Instead, the dark wall opened to light.

“Hurry,” Conrad's voice filtered through the light.

Gershon scooped up Itana and started toward the opening. “Raya, come on.”

The strange albino hesitated only a moment before following in step behind Gershon. He went through, into the lighted room of Conrad's library. Several council members

were there already, but instead of coming to order they were maintaining a visual on a strange black orb, another oddity Conrad kept. From the looks on their faces, they were strained and weak. Somehow they were using that ball to open the doorway.

“Gershon, look out,” called Conrad as he lifted a sword to Raya.

“She’s okay. She helped me save Itana.”

Conrad lowered his sword. Behind Raya the door closed. One of the council members, Nemari, fainted. Her energy was so low, she needed to feed. Another looked too pale.

Gershon sat Itana on the floor. Raya hadn’t given her much of the berry juice and Itana hadn’t woken. Gently, he pushed the hair from her face. She was so fragile. Vampires could instantly heal with blood, but nothing could make that happen in Itana, not unless she could be turned.

“What are we going to do, Conrad?” Gershon stood following Conrad to the bar.

“Excuse me, my guests are famished.” Conrad went to the phone and pulled out a list, setting it on the bar.

Gershon saw “Pizza” written on top of the paper with probably every pizzeria in town listed.

Conrad dialed the first number on the list. “One large pepperoni pizza.” He gave the address and went to the next number on the list. “One large cheese pizza.” When he finished with that one, he continued to the next number, insuring several delivery men would arrive.

It wasn’t uncommon for vampires to order pizza. Many enjoyed the food and greatly appreciated the tastier delivery person. They would pay and dine on the driver, making sure to erase the incident from his mind. Vampires were also great tipplers.

“How is she?” asked Conrad after his orders had been made.

“I don’t know.”

They both looked at Raya, who had found a shadowy spot in the corner where an elder council member had struck up a conversation. Gershon knew the woman by the name Angel, but that was short for Angelise or Angela or something.

“Raya is the same kind as Veris. Do you know what she is?”

“Is that why you brought her here, for identification?”

“She was a slave in Veris’s harem. Two others like her died when they bit me. She agreed to help me in exchange for escape from Veris.”

Angel walked up, letting her long white legs appear from the slit in her black dress. The woman was poetry in motion. Her blond hair was a perfect contrast to her dark clothing and darker eyes.

“Interesting guest. You know you drained four elders opening that door and you bring a mongrel in with you.”

“Mongrel?” Gershon had only heard the term in reference to dogs and werewolves.

“She’s a mongrel of creation, never evolving into animal or woman. I’ve heard of those beasts in the bowels of the earth. I’m surprised she’s not blind. Most creatures so afraid of light go blind when they are young.” She touched her lips with blood red nails. “So Gershon, I’ve heard that you’ve broken a dozen or so laws with this one.” She pointed at Itana.

“She’s not human. I can’t turn her until I know more.”

Angel leaned down, looking at Itana’s hands, then examining her face. “She is lovely

and looks very human.” She used her nail and made a small cut on Itana’s hand. Then she leaned closer, smelling the blood. “There’s silver in her veins and some toxin.”

“Veris bit her before I got there.”

“May I suggest that you take her upstairs. She needs her rest. Also, this Raya primitive needs to be put in the basement. Keeping her near the windows will at the very least drive her mad and at the most, make a terrible mess on the walls.”

“I will show Raya to the basement.” Conrad gave Gershon a terrible look, but the basement, his sanctuary, was the darkest place in the house.

“Thank you, Conrad.”

“Take Itana to her room and I will meet you there.”

Gershon didn’t like the sound of that. He was bound to be chastised for being the cause of so many unwanted guests. This simple affair had turned into a nightmare and he had no idea how to make things better for Itana, much less worry over minor inconveniences to Conrad.

“Wait, Conrad. I have a thought.” Angel went to his desk and pulled a very old, small silver coin from the drawer. “Is this pure silver?”

“Yes.”

Angel went to the door where Raya was making her way to the hall and basement. Without asking, Angel slit the back of her thigh and stuck the coin inside. She then stepped back while Raya made circles trying to remove the coin. Her screams grew and the incision turned a bright pink then red. For a minute Gershon thought Raya would catch fire and die on the floor. She couldn’t reach the coin and went down, grabbing at her throat. Gershon went forward to save her, although going against a council member’s decision could mean beheading. Angel held up on hand and mouthed “wait.”

Two arms disintegrated from Raya’s body, then two more, becoming ash on the floor. Her hair stayed white while her face changed and torso shortened. From her cries, the transformation was excruciating. For a minute Gershon watched, then Raya stopped screaming.

“You see, Gershon, silver will nullify many mystical properties, especially in half breeds. If Raya and Itana were from the same line, then Raya would look very human right now, like Itana. No creature so malformed could come from a pure bred line, so I thought we’d try this experiment.”

“Itana’s brother said that Itana had been a creature of dark, touched by night. These are the opposite, strange albinos.”

Gershon looked at Raya. She was still far from human, much to Gershon’s relief. If Itana had been one of these spider people, he would never be able to turn her. She would die as the other women had.

Raya’s hair held touches of pink and white. Her eyes were still pink, along with her nipples. She was shorter now, human, at least in shape. The pink changed to lines running over her body, like she’d been marked by a vine starting at her heels and continuing to her throat on the front and back of her body.

“Conrad, I’ll find her some clothes. I bet Raya will be able to handle light much better now. This will also keep Veris from tracking her and demolishing that lovely library.” Angel helped Raya to her feet and led her upstairs.

Itana groaned from the floor. Gershon picked her up and started up the stairs behind Angel, Conrad staying a step behind him. They continued up, Angel going in a room

Conrad had set up and Gershon going into his. No one spoke until Conrad shut the door on the bedroom.

“There are problems.”

“Is the council so upset with me?”

“There’s more to it.” Conrad put his ear to the door then sat on the bed next to Gershon and Itana. “Trouble brews in the council. There’s been talk of overthrowing it, and setting up carnal law.”

“Carnal law? That’s madness.”

Gershon had heard of carnal law, but never believed it had existed. According to the story, in some little European town vampires roamed freely, treating humans like cattle. They thought they were gods, until the humans hunted them down and ripped their hearts from their chests. That breed, the line of Ladrey, died. They learned the hard way that vampires weren’t gods and humans bred in too great a number to be controlled. The stories were carried to England, France, and later to the Americas. Now there were three councils, one in America, one in Europe and one in South America. The Europeans were the oldest and, in Gershon’s opinion, too haughty for their own good.

“It’s coming from a group in Ireland. Rumor has it that the European council fell yesterday. Its members slaughtered, their heads removed. Many believe that the rebels are on their way here.”

It was hard to believe. No one had challenged the creation of the council and no vampire in his right mind would attempt carnal law. It would mean an end to their kind.

“No wonder council members are showing up early for the tribunal. They’re hiding out here too.”

Conrad touched Itana’s hand. “She is lovely. Perhaps this isn’t the best time to be a vampire.”

“How many stalkers did they use to bring down the European council?”

“Stalkers, you use the old term for rebels to our laws.” Conrad touched his scruffy chin. “I heard that they only used five men and took out twenty.”

“Impossible.”

“Very possible.”

“Either way, the council will be deciding on much more than Itana’s fate. If things turn ugly, ignore their ruling and run with your bride.”

On the bed Itana coughed and rolled slightly, but still didn’t wake from the venom. Her blond hair grew damp with sweat. Gershon touched her face and found a slight fever.

“Do you know what I should do for Itana?”

Conrad shook his head no. “I wouldn’t try to turn her unless the council rules for a death sentence. With all the madness they might. In that case, run, fuck, and never stay anywhere long enough to get caught.”

## Chapter Seven

The large dining room was being used for the meeting. All of the council members arrived early, convening there in Conrad's home. Gershon stood to the side and watched the clamor slow to a dull roar as the council of fifteen readied for debate. It was never good when these important people arrived a day early.

Joseph, the head of the council, called the meeting to order by banging on the table. It wasn't a loud sound, but respect was not only valued, it was demanded. Being immortal meant more was expected and although no one grew old, half the council had been replaced in the last hundred years. Joseph was a stickler for respect.

Angel was the last to take her seat. Raya appeared briefly at the door, looking like one of them in her black jeans, half top and coiffed hair. The only differences in her now were the touches of pink. She disappeared and Gershon waited to see what charges he faced.

"The first item we discuss will be the simplest. An outsider knows about us. Gershon Malistoan has broken our covenant. He has brought a lady by the name of Itana into our world without turning her."

One lady gasped, blocking the sound of the first list of charges. Gershon looked to see Angel feigning concern. It brought Joseph's ire, but the rest smiled at the obvious attempt to see the humor in the situation. The council members who weren't there to see Itana pulled through the blackness followed by a half spider woman had heard about it. This was clearly no violation of keeping the human population at bay.

"I guess we'll open the floor to Angel. She obviously has something to say."

Only Angel could get away with that behavior. Everyone loved her and most had screwed her, men and women. Angel was one of the few who believed in living life to the fullest, while the oldest of their kind grew bored with everything, in turn becoming icons of boredom and elitism. She preferred to play the whore until she found her true mate; although she preferred to be called a lady of choices. Gershon loved her for that, not in the way most had. Angel and Gershon had always managed a friendship without a roll through the sheets.

"Gershon has broken no laws. Our laws clearly state that no human may know or come to know about The Congnatus."

He always thought it was odd that their empire was named after a Latin word for related by blood or a family. Vampires were related by their blood, but few considered themselves part of any family. That would be their downfall. If the stalkers came in, they would have to join forces, and true unions had never been done before.

"Itana isn't human. She has a human mother, or more to the point, a mixed breed mother. Her father's species has yet to be determined. This entire meeting needs to move on to more important issues. The council shouldn't concern itself whether or not other freaks of this world would blab about our existence. Please. We all know what's really been troubling our ranks. Let's move on to important business."

Angel sat down. It had never occurred to Gershon that Itana might be some strange mutt with only one-third of human traits. Angel had a good sense about these things. It would be uncommon for a human to have relations with something so odd as to bring



forth a son without a body. A mixed mother would be a logical choice, probably one hiding her true identity in the same way Itana had to.

“Fine. If you would all like to move this along, so be it. Who votes to have Itana destroyed?” No hands went up. “We’ve established that her mind can not be altered at this date. That leaves one last option. Who votes to have Gershon turn her and make her a proper wife?” All hands went up. “Problem solved. Gershon, tend to your woman while we discuss other matters.”

Turning her might not be that easy and could be a death sentence. Gershon started to speak when the window crashed in. Alarms started ringing, and the front door broke inward. One man came through each opening. Their foreheads were thick, with a heavy brow line making them look like cavemen. They’d shaved the sides of their heads, making an absurd stripe in their hair, not thin enough to be a Mohawk.

There were seven men in all, wearing heavy army boots, gloves, long trench coats and carrying weapons. Everyone in the group froze. The last man in the door dropped something into their midst and smoke rose. The intruders put small masks over their mouths and waited.

Gershon noticed that none of the other vampires appeared concerned over the smoke.

If the council were ready to battle then he would worry about fighting over the smoke rising from the floor. He started toward the first intruder, ready to make this transgression his last. Gershon took two steps before he realized his mistake. The room grew strange, his vision blurry. He started falling to the floor and realized whatever was in the smoke, found its own way in even when oxygen wasn’t inhaled.

*Please don’t let them find Itana*, was his last thought before blackness folded in on him.

## Chapter Eight

Itana woke lying on her side with her hands cuffed behind her back on the floor. It took her a minute to realize that she was still at Conrad's. A group of people were sitting on the couch, hands behind them, also probably cuffed. She didn't recognize any of them.

She blinked hard and looking around saw Gershon, handcuffed, sitting on the floor near the wall. His head was lowered. At first she thought he was sleeping, then she realized that he had given up all hope.

"Shh," Alard's voice came next to her head. "Close your eyes and listen."

She couldn't see Alard, but knew better than to question the urgency in his voice. Itana closed her eyes and waited motionless while she felt the smoky touch from her brother graze her face.

"These people broke inside. They are waiting until the moon rises to align with some damn star and then they will start slaughtering everyone here. The handcuffs are a special metal. Everyone's going to die unless you do something."

Someone paced nearby and Alard grew quiet. Itana was afraid to look. Apparently they thought she was unconscious and she preferred it that way. A moment later the sound of footsteps stopped but loud angry voices took their place.

"I'm going to slip you a knife."

Then Alard was gone. She knew what he meant by slipping her a knife. He wanted her to take the silver out of her arm, but even then she wouldn't be able to stop this angry group of men. She was one woman—one very tired, scared woman.

The lack of silver would also call Veris. Even if by some miracle she managed to save these vampires, Veris would claim her. An eternity as his sex slave would be hell. The thought of him touching her made her ill. She wasn't ready to go back to his den. He would hurt her. From the things he'd said, it was the only way he got off. Never mind the whips he'd threatened to use, his penis alone would rip her in half.

Itana opened her eyes again and saw the strange collection of people. Most were dressed in black, many to the point of looking like Goth teens ready to go to a club. Conrad was on the floor near Gershon. He saw Itana and said something to Gershon, who looked at her.

"What is this?" A man came towards her, alerted by Gershon's attention. "Sleeping Beauty finally woke up."

One strong hand circled her throat and pulled her to her feet. This was a vampire like none she'd seen. He wasn't the beautiful sleek creature like Gershon. This was a Neanderthal with madness in his eyes.

"What is your business here, human?"

He dropped her to the floor. Her feet slowed her, but the pain in her throat brought her to her knees. She gasped for air, filling her lungs. Slowly, she rose back to face this thing who had addressed her.

"I am Itana."

From the corner of her eye, she saw a mist near the wall. Alard must have gotten a knife. Much good that would do. Attempting to carve a twenty-year-old hunk of silver out of her arm could kill her. Her mother had put it close to a vein in case Itana got the

idea to dig it out as a child. Removing it would take a steady hand and sharp instrument, lest she bleed to death before getting it all the way out of her flesh.

“Why are you here with vampires? Are you their food, or are you to be turned?”

She looked at Gershon. His eyes filled with tears, a glassy sea of regret spilling down his cheeks. Behind him were several armed men, some with swords, one with a large ax. One look at the ax told her what it was for. The blade was stained with blood. She could almost see it coming down, striking the victim and severing their head from their bodies.

“They were deciding my fate. I am not worthy to know of their world but circumstance brought knowledge of their existence to me. I don’t know what their decision was.”

“Then choose, mortal. Do you die like them or feed our thirst?” His fangs elongated and she knew either choice would bring a death sentence, but she couldn’t stand the thought of those teeth in her flesh.

Death wasn’t such a bad option. At least she’d be free of Veris and if another life existed, she might be born again as something grander than a mixed child who brought so much shame to her mother.

“I do not fear death. Treat me as you would the vampire, not as your cattle.”

“Very well.” He put his hand on her shoulders, and pushed, forcing her forward onto her knees. “Lower your head so the strike will be clean. There is no need for extra suffering.”

She lowered her neck, moving her hair so he would have a clear target. Life hadn’t been kind to her. Surely the greater powers would have mercy on her in death. There would be no more loneliness, no pain, and no Veris.

“Don’t commit suicide on me.” Alard whispered frantically in her ear. “If you must die, do it saving Gershon. He risked everything for you. You can’t just leave him like that.”

“I can’t save him. I can’t even save myself. I’m too tired, Alard.”

“Who are you talking to?” The vampire stepped forward, gripping the ax in both hands.

“Gershon saved you, fought Veris, faced his dumb ass council. He did everything for you.”

“He deserves better than me.”

“Funny, all he wants is you. Itana, you’ve done some stupid things in your life, but it’s time to stop running. Face who you are.”

Alard wasn’t trying to keep his voice down and it made the soldiers look around, desperate to find the source. Itana raised her face, watching them. The movement provoked Alard. Her brother moved the curtains, twirled the lights above and even dropped one man’s pants. When he returned to her side, she felt the knife being placed into the palm of her hand.

“I can’t see. If I cut blind, I’ll kill myself.”

“Damn it, Itana. I can’t do it for you.”

“Keep them going then.”

Itana had long slender hands and fairly big wrists. She pulled against the cuffs while Alard honked horns outside, only to return and slide books off the tables and crash glasses onto the floor. If they survived, there would be a hell of a mess to clean up.

One wrist came free. She brought her hands in front where she could see her wrist.

Actually, the square was closer to her forearm between her wrist and elbow. The blade shook over her skin, quivering while she lowered it to her pale flesh. This was perhaps more terrifying than facing Veris. She didn't know who she really was, her lineage, even her father. So many years of wishing and praying she was human, gone. The illusion would dissolve and there was no way to know what she'd be when the silver left her body or what Gershon would think of her.

She looked over at him. "I love you, Gershon."

He looked up. "No matter what happens, you're always my Itana, my love, my wife."

She put the blade into her flesh, causing bright red blood to flow, to drip down in a line onto the floor. Another cut, deeper, more painful, and she could see the edge of silver hidden in the red. Her body and time hadn't corroded it.

The eyes of the vampires were on her. She could feel it. While the intruders chased a ghost, they were waiting to see what happened. She sliced again and this time it hurt bad enough to bring tears to her eyes. Burning filled her arm as she reached her thumb and index finger into the wound. At first the metal wouldn't move. She cried and thought a scream came out as she yanked it, but the pain blocked everything else from her mind. The metal made a sucking noise, her flesh squished down. Then it was free and appeared much smaller than she'd imagined.

When someone has been sick for so long, they forget what it was like to feel well, at least that's what her mother told her when she'd slid the metal into her arm. Itana had forgotten what the silver had done to her.

Her strength began returning and then came what she could only think of as growing pains. Twenty years worth of growing pains that forced her to her knees and made her howl into the air.

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Gershon saw Itana drop the metal to the floor, a strange insignia carved into a perfect square. Her blood colored the lines in the metal making the design darker than the rest of it.

He wasn't sure what would happen. She still looked like Itana and the thought occurred to him that Itana had been human all the time, and her mother a cruel prankster for putting the metal in her arm. The thought fled from his mind as Itana went flat against the floor, crying and screaming in pain. She looked in his direction once, and he saw that her beautiful eyes had changed to black.

"Itana?" he whispered, but couldn't manage more than that.

She could be any creature, any number of nightmare images he had never seen. He'd love her regardless, he knew that without question. However, he was interested to see his bride's true form and, from her changing skin, it looked like she wouldn't make him wait much longer.

Another howl came from her and the sound was pain, pure and awful. Tears filled his eyes for what she was enduring, what she was enduring for him. If he hadn't barged into her life, she would've been fine, waiting until her thirtieth birthday. Her life wouldn't be in danger, and she wouldn't be bleeding on the floor.

For a minute, he closed his eyes, not able to watch her agony. Curiosity made him look. Her blond hair grew streaks of black and her nails followed, reminding him of a Halloween witch with long curled nails. Hers looked fiercer but kept a feminine

appearance. Her entire body lengthened and her boots tore, exposing flesh. The heel on her normal human foot disappeared and her foot grew, sprouting diva claws similar to the nails on her hands. Her flesh didn't darken though; if anything it became lighter, nearly glowing from near the black accents of her eyebrows and thick lashes. She curled up, back towards the ceiling, face and knees on the floor. More pain must've burned through her because another yell, then the back of her t-shirt grew dark with blood. Something moved beneath it, and horror images of the movie *Aliens* filtered through his mind.

He didn't want to know what was moving on her back, beneath the cloth.

The cloth started ripping in two sections, straight lines, then the cloth broke free. There was a splash of blood and he saw no alien lurked there, but something black rose from the cloth. The tips looked sharp, much like her nails, but the rest unfolded into wings, black wings, shaped like a butterfly, except for the sharper points on the tops and bottoms.

The stalkers had been waiting, watching in awe at the transformation. Even Alard had stopped his pranks to watch Itana. He appeared as mist near the ceiling, waiting for what would happen. The stalkers grew restless and the one nearest Itana raised his ax, ready to kill her before she transformed into something dangerous.

Gershon tried to get up, but with his hands bound, he couldn't move. They'd woken in those damned cuffs, special metal to keep the vampire and the like trapped and waiting for their deaths.

There was nothing he could do but watch as the large man approached Itana's changing body. He raised the ax. Itana seemed to be in too much pain to notice. The ax hesitated above the rebel's head, hanging in midair before slamming down. Gershon screamed a warning but Itana didn't move until the ax started to fall.

"Murderer!" she screamed.

One hand reached up to grab the wooden section of the falling blade. Her other hand swiped across his middle, slashing through the fabric and sending drops of blood across the floor. The rebel staggered back, releasing the blade. Itana let it fall to the floor, the blade imbedding itself into the wood. She went forward. He couldn't see her face, but knew hate showed there, burning behind those black eyes.

The injured man bled but, being a vampire, the wounds quickly began to heal. Gershon had thought nothing was stronger than his kind, the man looking at Itana had different ideas. It was strange seeing a vampire so afraid. The man may have never known terror, but Itana was giving him a crash course.

"Please don't." The man begged, palms pressed together in a prayer to this new creature. "Please."

She emitted a noise; maybe it was a laugh. Once the man was in reach, Itana reached one clawed hand out, gripping what was left of the front of his shirt. She pulled him closer, gripped him with two hands, and tossed him painfully to the wall. Before his body could bounce from the wall and slide to the floor, she reached back, throwing nothing but air toward him, but it wasn't air. Whatever it was materialized black and splattered against him like gum, holding him against the wall.

"She's a Night Sprea."

Gershon barely noticed Conrad's words. He watched Itana and saw the rebel vampires attack. It was brutal. Two came up from behind and two in front. Itana grimaced in pain as she moved. She jerked her head around, trying to keep track of all of

them. One of the men in front attacked, coming forward with a sword in hand. Itana made quick work, gumming the sword in darkness then spearing him with her wing before tossing him against the wall. Before she noticed the two behind, they were on her. The two grabbed her hands while the one in front hit her across the mouth. Gershon's heart sank.

"Don't hurt her."

His alarm was unnecessary. Her head moved with the strike but that was all. Then he noticed the shadows coming closer, creeping across the floor like snakes needing to devour a meal. As they touched the vampires holding her, they grew substantive, seemingly at her will.

One of the rebels was instantly pulled to the ground, the shadow growing thick and bubbling. The second met a similar fate, pulled into a corner and confined. The third tried to run. It was the most incredible thing Gershon had ever seen. A wall of darkness rose in his path but he was too quick and entered it before he could stop. Itana smiled and blew him a kiss as the shadow changed to something like glass and encased him. They could hear his muffled cries, but it looked like a very good mime trapped in a box that had become real. The darkness didn't keep him from view, but displayed him as he banged on the dense air.

From the floor, the vampire injured on her wing rose and started toward the door. There should've been two more around there someplace, but Gershon had lost track of them during the commotion.

"Stop him, Itana. He has the key."

In one jump Itana launched herself across the room and snatched the vampire before he reached the edge of the door. The movement was so quick, both were blurs until she held him by his throat and tore away both his front pants pockets. The key tumbled out, clinking on the floor. The stalker joined his friends, caught like flies against the wall.

It was over. Gershon wanted to be free, to wrap his arms around her. The vampire council would never deny her anything after her act of bravery and Conrad knew her species, a Night something or another. If she could be turned, Conrad would know and if not, they would still be together. Her form was beautiful, even as she walked toward him, black eyes, black lips, the whitest skin, and strange wings, he knew that he loved her no matter her body.

Itana walked slowly across the floor, stepping more on the balls of her feet since her heel appeared to be above where a normal ankle would sit. She looked at him, concern filling those black eyes.

"You're beautiful, Itana. Alard was right. You are from the night, an amazing gift of darkness."

"You don't find me repulsive?" Her voice was deeper but still Itana, down to the frightened quiver.

"I could never find you repulsive. I love you. You are my mate."

Her bottom lip trembled, strange gray tears running down her face. She took another step forward and he couldn't wait to hold her in his arms and make the bad feelings go away. Then the floor opened.

There wasn't time to avoid the white limbs climbing from the darkness. Veris had come for his mate. He rose, pulling himself up by his six arms, looking more like a spider than a man.

“You are mine!”

Itana’s bared her teeth and growled. “I belong to Gershon.”

Veris came forward, fast, spiked hands ready to take her into the underworld. Itana pushed the darkness around him but it couldn’t hold the white form. Then Gershon remembered that Veris was a creature of darkness too.

“Itana, the dark helps him. Pull the shadows away.”

Itana threw the key toward him and it landed in his lap. At the same time she started pulling in the darkness, stripping it from the corners. Everything in the room grew brighter yet Veris kept coming. Light grew around them, too bright for Gershon’s comfort. Veris finally stumbled.

Gershon was flexible but confined, he still couldn’t get the key from his lap. Angel slid from the couch onto the floor in front of him and snatched the key. She freed herself, then Gershon.

“We have to get out of here,” she spoke as the cuffs fell away. “Itana could kill us all.”

“We have to help her.” Gershon saw Veris falter but he kept coming and Itana kept backing up.

“Gershon, help some of us get free. You can turn Itana. Turn her and Veris won’t be able to mate with her.”

Veris grabbed Itana and she kicked his head, then sliced him with her wing. Gershon watched as he ran behind the council members, freeing them. Veris was injured, bleeding but started dragging Itana to his black door.

“Everyone attack this new threat. Payback the woman who saved us.”

Gershon saw the faces of the people around him. From birth, he’d been taught that vampires were a proud race. He believed it more than ever now. Men and women grabbed whatever weapon they had, whether it be a sword, or a lamp from the table. Everyone in the council attacked Veris. They wouldn’t let Itana be taken from them.

The fight looked grand at first. The vampires were faster, attacking from the sides but Veris kept pulling Itana to the doorway. She lashed out at Veris while Angel smashed his head with a book and Conrad hit him with a fireplace poker. They beat him down but he healed almost as fast as the vampires. For every gash received, Veris reached out, causing the same pain in turn. Those limbs were wickedly fast and the spikes caused vampires to cry out. One latched onto Veris’s hand, before he reached down and tore into his shoulder.

“Vampire blood kills his kind,” screamed Gershon

Gershon watched several vampires jump on him. For all Veris’s fighting ability, once the council members were close enough, they were stronger. Men grabbed his limbs while another took hold of his head. A vampire brought his sword to Veris’s neck.

“Wait,” screamed Conrad. “Do that and he’ll grow two heads. Feed him blood.”

Gershon came forward, and cut his wrist. The vampire at Veris’s head opened the beast’s mouth, or at least attempted to keep the bizarre pink and white flesh opened. Veris twisted his head, fighting to stay away from the blood dripping onto his face. At first, not much made it passed those pink lips, but the moment Gershon’s blood slipped down Veris’ throat, the blackness started in him like instant rot. He met the same fate as his harem.

“Get away from him. The darkness might take you too,” yelled Raya from the corner

where she'd been confined. "On this plane, the darkness reclaims us.

The vampires let go and stepped back, seeing the doorway Veris had opened disappear and reappear beneath him. This time it smelled of dirt as Veris turned into dark ash and slipped into the nothingness where he'd come from.

"Itana."

Gershon went to her. She sat on the floor and looked at the spot where the darkness had taken Veris. The opening closed, but she kept staring, as if not believing he was finally gone.

He pulled her against him, holding her tightly and kissing the top of her head. The blond parts were darker and the black streaks were like nothing he'd ever seen. Her clawed hand reached to his chest, but she was careful, touching, feeling him there with her.

"I'm a monster."

"No. You're my wife."

Conrad stepped near them, a fleeting look of longing crossing his face in admiration of their love. "Her kind was predicted to end the world. It's in one of my obscure texts that a woman of night, a mix of the Sprea, would destroy the vampire and human alike. She would reshape the world to her choosing and sunlight would be no more." He smiled, finding humor in the story. "Not this beauty though. Her heart is good. However, Night Spreas are more powerful than we. She may not wish to join us."

"Let the choice be hers," said Angel as she adjusted her clothing. "She can return to being human, stay Night Sprea, or become a vampire. She's had no decisions in her true form for too long. I don't think there's a person on the council that would deny her that."

Gershon looked around the room. Several nodded in agreement. For the first time in Itana's life, she could decide who and what Itana really was.

"You two need to talk. Take her upstairs while we clean up." Conrad touched the edge of her wing and she looked up at him.

"Clean up," protested Angel. "I don't clean. Don't you have a maid?"

"You want a maid to clean up this?" He pointed to the blood splattered across the wall, the axe in the floor, the broken furniture, and the other harder to explain items.

"Let's get out of here." Gershon looked at her, still amazed at this new being.

Gershon stood and helped Itana to her feet. She was his height now and nearly naked except for the bit of pants that still covered her sex and upper thighs. Itana must've realized and covered her breasts with her hands.

"Conrad, do you have a blood dagger?"

"Yes." He looked at Gershon a moment. "Are you going to make this official?"

"She deserves it. There are some old ways that should continue."



## Chapter Nine

Gershon led Itana back to the bedroom. He couldn't help staring as they walked together, hand in hand. Her wings were lacey, but still reminded him of a butterfly. The skin on her hand felt the same; many things were the same, especially her smile.

They went into the bedroom and Gershon locked the door behind them. He set the dagger Conrad had given them on the dresser. He would use it later, at the appropriate time once she made her choice.

Itana stepped to the antique stand mirror near the wall. She wasn't admiring its beauty though. Her reflection held her attention. She flexed her wings, held her hands up, then touched the mirror's surface. The large black eyes didn't look like her human version. They grew wide, taking in the entirety of her new appearance.

"I'm a monster."

Gershon eased behind her and touched the lacy flesh of her wings. It felt like silk, except for the sharp points. Taking her from behind wouldn't work so he moved around, stepping between her and the reflection. He pressed his mouth to hers and, despite her mood, she responded. The tension melted away and Itana reacted like the human woman she'd once been.

"Become my wife," he whispered against her lips.

"Why would you want a wife like this?"

He walked her backwards to the bed. Her wings folded behind her as he lay her onto the covers. She started to protest, but Gershon covered her mouth with kisses, tangling his tongue with hers.

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Itana didn't open her eyes until she felt his lips leave hers. When she'd looked in the mirror, horror filled her at this new form. Now, looking up at Gershon, she only saw love in his eyes and desire.

"I'm going to make love to you." It wasn't a question but she nodded anyway. "Before I climax, I will make a small cut above my heart. If you want to become a vampire, suck the wound. If you don't, put your hand over it so I don't accidentally contaminate you. Either way is fine with me."

Again she nodded, but wasn't sure if she was ready to make this decision. She'd spent her life pretending to be human, hiding in their world and hoping no one discovered her. For the first time, she'd embraced her other side and now Gershon was asking her to choose another foreign form.

She looked at him and he descended on this strange new body. His mouth went to her breasts and he suckled. This new form appreciated his attentions as much as her human one had. She reached to the back of his head, tangling her fingers through his dark hair. His teeth grazed her nipple while his fingers lightly pinched the other. Arousal dampened her slit as he went lower, kissing her hips and ripping away what was left of her pants.

He tossed the ruined cloth of her pants across the room. She glanced down to find her sex covered by black hair, instead of her normal blond. The short curls made a half circle above her pubic bone. Gershon looked at it in fascination and smiled up at her.

That smile made her want him more than ever. She knew as he slipped one finger into her, followed by a second, that he accepted her totally.

A purr of delight came from her as his fingers worked back and forth. She waited, knowing what he'd do to her next and needing to feel his mouth. Gershon didn't disappoint. His mouth went lower and, to her delight, this form had a clit as sensitive as her last. His lips suckled, then he nipped her, sending a charge of pleasure.

"Fuck me," she brushed the hair from his face. "I want you inside me."

He listened to her request, stopping before the first climax could sweep through her. Although his mouth brought her immense pleasure, she wanted his body, the union his cock sliding into her mound would bring.

Gershon climbed up her body, giving her the delight of flesh, smooth and soft, slipping up her hips, between her thighs. His chest brushed against her breasts. When his head became level with hers, the kisses continued, hard enough to bruise her lips. Sweet passion swept through her like an intoxicating drug.

"Oh, Gershon."

In one smooth motion, he slid inside her, tentatively at first. He stretched her, even this new form had to adjust to his girth. She was moist enough, letting her arousal guide him deeper into the folds. He was inside, part of her, no matter her body. Somehow, he'd touched her soul.

She brought her hips up, and he filled her, putting pressure on those sweet parts deep inside where only a hard fuck could reach. His movements were slow though, in and out. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her with more love than she'd thought possible. There was no doubt that he wanted her, and only thought of her as their bodies joined.

His hips glided against hers, pressing until she cried out. He was pacing himself. Yet soon his control grew weak. His body drove into hers, balls slapping against her flesh. She didn't want to come, not yet. She tried thinking about anything, but his muscled physique and bedroom eyes held her. The edge was close but she wasn't ready not yet, not yet.

He bared his teeth and bent forward, long fangs entering her neck. The pleasure so intense, her thighs tightened trying to stop the pleasure from exploding. His mouth felt so good, more than sex but a bonding of life forces, of spirit, and soul.

"Gershon," she called out as her own orgasm rocked her body to the point of delirium. Never had anything been so intense. Lights danced in front of her eyes.

"Choose," he asked while running a single fingernail across his skin.

There was no thought to her form, only wanting to be joined with him deeper. She brought her mouth to the dark red line oozing from the incision and drank. Her orgasm continued, fading as his seed filled her body.

Itana sucked the wound, filling her mouth with something sinfully sweet until he pushed her lips away. She gasped from the pleasure coursing through her veins. Gershon reached next to the bed and took the knife from the dresser, along with a small cup. He leaned up, holding her hand in his, fingers interlaced. He slid the knife between their palms.

"Itana, will you be my wife?"

"Yes."

Gershon turned the knife, cutting both their palms while his cock still rested inside

her. A trickle of blood filled the cordial glass. He swirled the dark red liquid then sipped. With the remnants on his lips, he handed the glass to her.

“Finish it while our bodies are one. It’s only a ceremony, but it means something to me.”

“Then it’s important to me.” She drained the glass.

## Chapter Ten

An hour passed before Itana opened her eyes. Gershon had been watching her, seeing the changes creeping through her as she slept. Itana's hair was already turning blond again and the wings were gone, turned to ash in their bed. She looked like the human Itana again.

"Are you okay?" He sat next to her, brushing some of the ash from her hair.

She nodded. "What happened?"

"You fell asleep."

He was surprised by the quick change. Usually it took days or weeks, depending on the human's immune system for the vampire blood to create a change. Itana readily accepted it and the change worked quickly. Tomorrow she might have her first hunger.

"How long was I out?"

"Not long." He pulled a dress from the chair. "Angel thought you'd want something a bit fancier for your introduction downstairs."

"Introduction?"

"Just a party."

Gershon helped her dress, sliding the black lace over her pale skin. She wasn't quite so white anymore and lines where her wings had been, marked her back. Those would probably fade in time.

It was a dying custom that newly turned vampire brides had a sort of coming out party. Vampires didn't have true marriage ceremonies in the open, but the party was the formal way to declare the love and bond. He liked having something traditional in a world where vampires feared discovery and their traditions were slowly being swept away for fear of discovery.

He zipped the back of the dress and she turned, presenting herself to him. Itana was lovely in her dress, leaving him breathless. She looked a little weak so Gershon brushed her hair, then took her by the hand where Conrad had arranged a party.

They descended the stairs and the main room grew quiet. It was amazing what they'd done in the short amount of time. Where there had once been blood and broken furniture, music played, and lit candles illuminated the room, giving off a soft ethereal glow. Angel had brought out the wineglasses, filling each for a toast to the bride.

"My wife, Itana," he announced as they entered the room. Many lowered their head in respect of the newest addition to their clan; some bowed at the waist. "May you all come to find love as I have."

Gershon looked around the room and found Alard. It was good to have Itana's brother in attendance and he appeared to take an interest in Raya. That was an odd thought, a man without a body and a spider woman hiding as almost human. Nonetheless, Raya was lovely with her pink vine covered body and Alard managed to look more substantial. He supposed in this day and age Raya could claim the vines were tattoos. No one would know the difference.

Itana gripped his hand tightly as they moved through the crowd. She was the most beautiful woman there and Gershon knew he'd made the right choice. They danced, drank, and laughed. This was the start of their lives and Itana would never fear Veris

again.

“Will you be happy as a vampire?”

“I will be happy as your wife.”

They kissed and Gershon felt the stares of several vampires. When Gershon looked up, Conrad had tears in his eyes and blew them both a kiss. In seven years, Gershon would attend Conrad’s wife’s introduction. That much he was sure.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Jennifer Cloud was born in Asheville, North Carolina where she met her husband who encouraged her to write after finding a partial manuscript in the bottom of her armoire.

She now resides in Florida with her husband and two daughters. She writes romantic suspense, paranormals, and eroticas. Visit her website at [jennifercloud.com](http://jennifercloud.com) or email her at [jennifercloud1@aol.com](mailto:jennifercloud1@aol.com).

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